ARGOSY ALL-STORY WEEKLY

Charles Neville Buck's

FLIGHT TO THE HILLS

And the Peaks of Emotion

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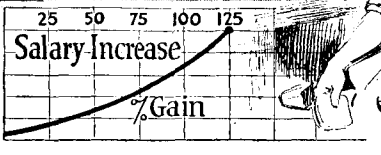

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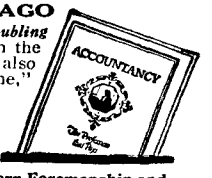

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXIX CONTENTS FOR JUNE 13, 1925 NUMBER 4

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THE PERFECT GIRL — By Arthur Preston Hankins

Complete — Author of "Gold from the Cañon," etc.

His new story is one of entrancing interest involving mystery that fascinates. You will get all of it in the issue for June 20

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We are making this wonder suit in tremendous quantities—not one at a time—but by the thousands. All that modern machinery and efficient methods can do to produce big value at small cost is applied in making the new Comer suit. And finally, we are using the same modern efficiency in selling it—direct from factory to wearer through our local representatives.

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THE JUNE MUNSEY

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The chief features of the June *Munsey* are a complete short novel of New York life, "WHO ISSYLVIA?" by Gertrude Pahlow, and a complete novelette, "THE HUMAN SPHINX," an absorbing mystery story by Ellis Parker Butler. The magazine will also contain a wealth of short stories by some of the leading writers of the day.

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⅝ "	$98.50	2 "	$394.00	

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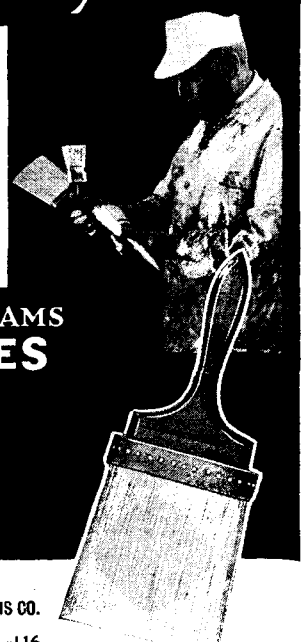

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Portia's father was old-fashioned

IN THE days of Shakespeare's famous heroine, buying and selling were contests of wits. In Venice, haggling and dickering were the vogue. Along the Rialto, sharp practice was the rule. Every purchase of silk or spices was made at the buyer's risk. One had to be a shrewd judge of values and one's fellows to escape trickery.

Portia's father—a merchant—was used to the ideas of guess, luck, and accident. So much so, indeed, that it seemed natural to him to entrust the choice of his daughter's husband to three closed caskets and a lucky guess!

Nowadays, we do not transact business blindly—nor leave important decisions to chance. It is not necessary for us to gamble when we buy. Commodities are identified for us by trade-marks. Manufacturers go to the advertising columns to tell us about their products. Merchants describe their merchandise—price, quality and service.

By reading advertisements, we get a knowledge of goods and stores that we can depend on. Advertising reduces chance, in buying, to a minimum.

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Its departments are unique and popular. SOLVING CIPHER SECRETS is better than crossword puzzles. HEADQUARTERS GOSSIP is the place where William J. Flynn draws on his store of experience to comment on the detective and criminal news of the day to point the moral or adorn a tale with reminiscence. The BUREAU OF CORRESPONDENCE is the place where the readers meet to talk over the magazine or the subjects that the magazine suggests; to ask questions and to contribute their bit of information.

June 13th Issue Features

The outstanding feature is the true detective stories told with all the thrill and effectiveness of fiction. MICHAEL I. SILVERSTEIN, Chief of Detectives of Mount Vernon, tells of the time he combed New York to find the meanest thief of his experience.

Louise Rice, in

Too Many Clews

writes of the murder case that was hard to follow because there were too many clews.

An old swindler tells, through DON H. THOMPSON, of the days and ways he worked the gentle art of ambulance chasing.

The Body in the Taxi

By Florence M. Pettee

A gray arm in the fog, a sudden blow, and an innocent man is on his way to the gallows. Only DIGBY GRESHAM could read the story of the torn shoe lace.

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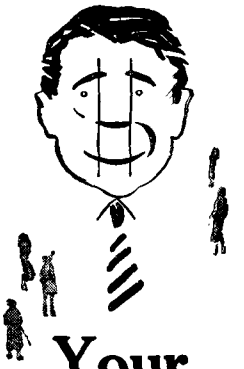

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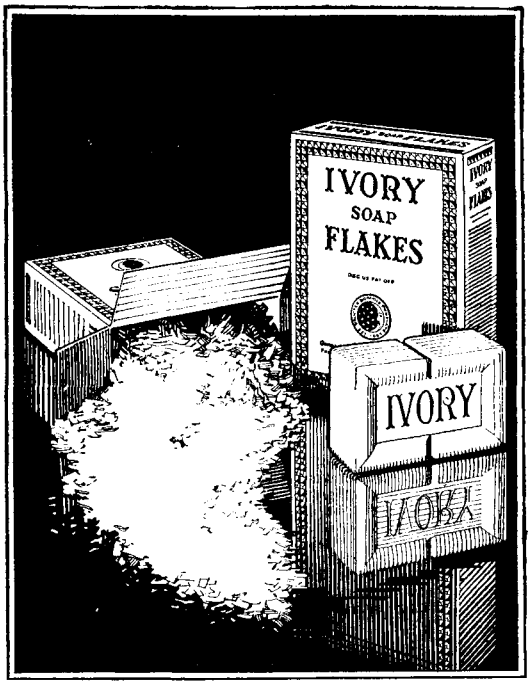

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ARGOSY-ALLSTORY WEEKLY

VOL. CLXIX SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 1925 NUMBER 4

Flight to the Hills

By CHARLES NEVILLE BUCK

Author of "The Battle Cry," etc.

FOREWORD

IT is the sincere belief of the editorial department that this serial is a truly great achievement. Its unforgetable characters scale the very peaks of emotion.

Our readers will share the torturing doubt that came to Cynthia Meade. Which of her two gallant suitors should she marry? In what environment would she be happier? What of the losing man's deep sorrow?

There is a moot question among readers as to whether the endings of stories always should be happy. Some are keenly disappointed when a finale is sad. Others are as sharply critical if a tragic situation winds up in comedy.

If you had been the editor, which of the optional conclusions would you have preferred in this masterly analysis of a woman's soul? Would you have turned thumbs down on Wade Murrell, mountaineer, or Jock Harrison, man of the town?

After you have read the serial in its entirety you will be *deus ex machina*—a god from the machine, as in the Classical tragedies, brought on the stage to solve superhuman difficulties—if you communicate your decision to the editor. The majority of

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opinions so received will determine the ending that the author is to retain in the book version soon to be published.

Therefore, read with a critical mind, but vote as your heart dictates because you are giving joy or sorrow to characters that literally are in search of their fate.

THE EDITOR.

CHAPTER I.

THIS SON OF FEUDS.

THE attorney arose from his chair with the briskness of gratification for having brought a doubtful undertaking to a successful close. From a sharply official directness, his tone and manner altered to an indulgent jocularity.

"And now, Mr. Murrell," he suggested, "since nothing remains except for me to draw your check and for you to deposit it, I may ask you how it feels to find yourself a capitalist?"

The other man had remained seated and neither his eyes nor lips responded to the smiling cue. He ignored the question as to his personal reactions and shook his head with an obdurate deliberation.

"I don't want no check an' I don't low ter put ther money in no bank," he made drawling announcement. "I reckon I'll hev ter disconfit ye ter go ter ther bank-house an' git hit out. I'll tote hit along back home with me in cash."

The lawyer's brows gathered into little wrinkles of protest, although he reflected this hairbrained folly was no concern of his.

"My dear fellow," he made dutiful expostulation. "Thirty thousand dollars is a sizable sum." He broke off on a self interruption of laughter. "Did you ever handle, or even see, thirty thousand dollars in cash—in one lump?"

"Ef I hain't," came the calm response, "I aims ter see hit right soon now."

"It's your affair, of course," the attorney answered, "but I'd feel derelict if I didn't try to dissuade you. How far is it from Asheville here to your home in Kentucky? You said you lived at the head of Little Flinty Creek, didn't you?"

"Hit's a matter of some seventy measured miles—ther way a crow'd fly," came the reply. "But ther way I've got ter fare along ter git thar hain't es straight ner yit as level es thet. Hit wiggles an' wingles roun'about an' hit hists an' draps acrost some siv'ral successions of ridges." The speaker paused, then added: "But still, though, ther new roads is good endurin' ther nigh part of ther journey."

Again there was a brief pause, and then in after reflection the hillsman added: "Hit hain't nowise so slavish a journey es what hit was when Dan'l Boone went acrost thet way."

Mr. Chilton stood looking into the face of the man across his office table. He was seeking to determine whether back of the unflickering gravity of those features there lurked an ambushed sense of humor, or whether this mountaineer occasionally dropped into solemn toned comments, savoring of jest, with entire unconsciousness of their flavor.

The man had risen now, and he stood a shade above six feet, topped off by the black felt hat which he had worn throughout the interview. The dark clothes, palpably his Sunday raiment, were typical of the sternly repressed life in the strange uplands that have stood isolated and almost unamended for two centuries.

They were cheap store clothes, but—and this was not so typical—they were scrupulously neat, and they sat on the splendid oak-and-leather strength of the man's lithe body as plumage might on a hawk or the sleek pelt on a fox.

Beneath them one seemed to feel the flow of muscles, not bulky but resilient with power, and the clean-shaven face itself might be searched vainly for the betrayal of any faltering or weakness. The eyes had that fresh alertness of men who live largely outside house walls, of men who must compete with the keen physical senses of animals that prey and are preyed upon; the sharp nose of the skulking fox; the long-ranged vision of the soaring eagle.

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It was to be assumed that just as Wade Murrell had known, in a century when most of his kind had forgotten it, the self-reliance of the pioneer, so he had also known the meager poverty of the back-woodsman.

He had a little while ago assured the lawyer: " Over th'ar wh'ar I lives at, folks is right often hurtin' bad fer ther needcessities of life."

So it must have marked a high point in his experience to have concluded the sale of a timber tract, which had been an almost forgotten property in his family since the days when a great-grandfather had emigrated from North Carolina to Kentucky. To have sold, for thirty thousand dollars, land that he had never himself seen and for which he felt no rooted attachment might have been construed as a reasonable cause for elation.

Surely back there, where he and his kind lived in log houses among rocky and tilting fields, thirty thousand dollars must spell wealth, and wealth suddenly acquired should spell excitement.

It did not matter, reflected Chilton, that thirty thousand was much less than the land was worth, since the city of Asheville had with its own growth developed adjacent values. It was thirty thousand, none the less, and Wade Murrell should show some stirring of delight.

But as he looked at the face of his visitor again, Shelby Chilton smiled. No, the illogic would lie in this man's showing surprise at anything. He was wóven of stoic tissue and reticent fiber.

For an uneasy instant, the lawyer felt almost a qualm of fear less Murrell learn hereafter how ungenerous a bargain had been driven with him. Men throughout Appalachia remembered the story of the " Murrell-Skidmore war," the feud that had scorched and blighted two generations of grudge-nursing families until a brittle peace had been accomplished.

This man was of that blood, too, and one could fancy his face, even in a scene set to the desperation of smoking rifles, with no other change upon it than a somber fury in its eyes and a tautened straightness at its lips.

Wade must still be in his later twenties, but the volcano of hatred over there in the " Kaintuck Ridges " had not become dormant or ceased to spew its lava of vindictiveness too soon for him to remember it. It had not quieted to a specious tranquillity before he had grown up enough to handle a gun—and presumably he had handled a gun.

It seemed somehow easy to think of him as standing in deep woods or on the streets of a ragged mountain town with little spirals of rifle smoke curling about him and an acrid stench of burned powder lingering in the air.

" Ye says," Chilton heard the other announcing quietly, " that thirty thousand dollars is a right sizable sum of money an' I hain't a seekin' ter belie ye. We've done set our hand-write ter ther papers an' a trade's a trade, but I don't delight none ter look like no fool."

He paused, then went on in the same level, almost monotonous, drawl. " That's why I'm ergoin' ter name hit ter ye right now that I knows full well ye hain't paid me no fa'r price. Hit hain't because I don't know better that I'm gittin' scrouged. Hit's jest because hit satisfies me. I've got a license ter sell cheap an' quick, ef I sees fit, 'stid of hangin' on an' cavilin'."

Mr. Chilton was both startled and relieved, but he gave smiling assurance: " I am acting for others as you know. I am bound by my instructions."

" I didn't aim ter haggle over hit," Murrell reminded him, " or I'd hev done hit afore now—but I hain't ter say ridin' home feelin' like no charity's been done me—an' now I'd be obleeged ter ye ef ye'd go down thar ter ther bank-house an' bid 'em count me out ther money."

Once more the lawyer demurred.

" It's an insane risk to take, Murrell. You're riding lonely roads, and I dare say people in your neighborhood know what you came over here for. Most men have enemies as well as friends. You're probably like the rest of us in that respect."

Beginnings of anger dawned in the gray clarity of the hillsman's eyes, but the rest of the face remained impassive.

" What enemies I've got don't steal," he

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said brusquely. " Amongst my friends an' foes alike thar's been some siv'ral killin's off an' on—but I hain't nuver heered tell of no thievin'."

" Perhaps then you'll be safe enough when you get into your own hills," suggested Chilton dryly. " And I congratulate you on living in such secure surroundings. But before you cross the Kentucky border you *will* meet people who aren't above stealing."

" Not from me. Once I gits that money, I'll leastways hev hit fer a spell—an' then ther feller thet man-powers hit loose from me, he'll come nigh ter earnin' hit." Murrell broke off abruptly, and once more the warning gleam flashed into his eyes. " I hain't got hit yit, though," he added. " Hev ye got any due reason fer seekin' ter put me off any longer?"

Shelby Chilton laughed and reached for his hat.

" Come on," he said brusquely. " You're your own man and the blood of this folly is on your own head."

Murrell nodded briefly.

" I've done been in thet thar fix afore now. I'll be more satisfied when thet money's in my own saddlebags, too."

Together the two men, one dapper and worldly of appearance, the other an anachronism who had stepped out of another age, left the office and walked past the display windows of gift-shops, tea-rooms and drug stores along Haywood Street to a substantial bank building in Patton Avenue.

The attorney smiled quietly as he explained to the cashier his somewhat unusual wish for so much money in specie and paper. The cashier glanced up, caught a glimpse of the sober faced mountaineer, and an amused grin made its beginnings at the corners of his lips and eyes, the grin of indulgence for the vagaries of a clodhopper. Then, for some reason, as he felt those steady eyes piercingly, unhumorously meeting his own, the smile died aborning, and he nodded with a discreet politeness.

" I see," he said, as if such transactions were the rule rather than the exception. " Suppose you gentlemen step inside," and he waved a directing hand toward a small conference room.

A few minutes later, having verified the count with painstaking care, and having stowed a small amount of money in his trousers pocket, the man from the " Kaintuck Ridges " wrapped a piece of newspaper around the sealed envelope which contained the larger balance. This packet he stowed under his arm as he arose.

To the lawyer, at the door of the bank, he commented briefly: "Now I reckon I'll bid ye farewell." Then, as if a sense of social obligation had belatedly asserted itself, he amended: " Howsoever hit's nigh noontime, hain't hit? I'd enjoy ter hev ye eat a snack with me, ef so be ye kin show me a place whar they sells good vittles at. I reckon ye knows this town better than what I does."

Chilton hesitated, then accepted. This barbarian was a type and to him something of a human enigma. Perhaps now that his money was safe in his pocket, he might be beguiled into conversation, and if he chose to talk there was apt to be rugged drama in his recitals.

" How do you travel back home—horseback?" inquired the lawyer.

The two were seated now at a dining table in a hotel not so fashionable as others farther from the center of the town, yet fashionable enough, he fancied, to contain elements of wonderment for a backwoodsman.

He had selected the place with a rather malicious delight of anticipation. He wanted to observe the uneasiness of a countryman unacquainted with such an atmosphere of sophistication, and to analyze that countryman's reactions. Whatever acquaintances saw him there would know he had a client in tow, and would understand.

But the man who sat opposite him gave no evidence of either discomfiture or amazement. He sat straight, but not stiff; he looked about him with only a casual and restrained interest, and before he laid his hand on a knife, a fork or a spoon he paused to see how others did these things.

His eyes took in the business of manners so quickly that only one watching him closely would have noted any hesitation. A rude but genuine dignity sat upon the fellow who was in an atmosphere alien to his

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life and whose spirit of stoicism scorned any manifestation of embarrassment.

A few tables away a scrupulously dressed man paused and studied him.

That man was a well known actor of the screen who had come to the mountains of North Carolina to make a feud picture. The continuity called for such scenery as was to be had here, and since the hero of red-blooded drama required also, when the make-up was removed and the grease paint cold-creamed away, to have about him the luxuries of civilization, he and his company had selected Hickory Nut Gap near Asheville for their location.

Now he was thinking that for his part, particularly for its manners and its bearing, he might do well to revise his former conception. If he could manage to look like that fellow there—undoubtedly the thing in the flesh that he was aping—he might strengthen his characterization.

It occurred to him suddenly that he had been heretofore in danger of burlesquing it.

"How does I fare home?" repeated Wade Murrell slowly. "Wa'al, from Cowbell Mountain I goes mule-back. I left my ridin' critter th'ar because he fell lame on me. I've got ter git new mule irons on one fore foot an' one hind one."

"But Cowbell Mountain is almost half way, isn't it? How do you cover that distance?"

"Tom Ike Quillen, he aimed ter hev a new fifth wheel put on his joltwagon—an' he didn't want ter leave his corn patch. So I borried his jolt-wagon an' driv ther balance of the way to town. I aims ter hev hit fixed fer him."

"And you start back that same way?"

"When I goes back. I lowed ter sleep hyar ternight. I misdoubts ther jolt-wagon hain't finished yit."

"You mean to knock about this town overnight with all that money on you? Don't do it, Murrell."

"I'm obleeged ter ye fer yer counsel," said the hillsman briefly. "I reckon I hain't in no sore peril."

At a near-by table a woman had drawn a silver case from her vanity bag and was lighting a cigarette.

Wade Murrell looked at her for a moment and his eyes clouded with the intolerant disapproval of the strait-laced — or so his companion read the expression.

"The lady," Chilton informed him quietly, "is a rather celebrated movie actress. Did the cigarette surprise you? It's getting quite ordinary these days."

Murrell's reply was again a surprise.

"I reckon thet's her business—albeit I hates them nasty leetle contraptions," said he shortly. "Hit put me in mind of somethin' I'd done disremembered, though. I've got ter take my mammy back some pipe tobacco. She loves ther fotched-on kind."

The expression in the clear eyes showed that, for Wade Murrell, the novelties of this place had already faded in interest and that the hillsman's thoughts were back again in his hills. He smiled slowly, and Chilton remembered that he had not seen him smile before.

"God holp me," exclaimed the mountaineer, with an explosive burst of emphasis as rare as his smile, "ef I disremembers ter git mule irons put on that ridin' critter of mine afore I starts back! Mammy, she won't nuver cease ter fault me fer hit ef I does."

They were rising from the table now, and for an instant Chilton thought the countryman was going to turn away, leaving his packet of new wealth on the tablecloth.

"Don't forget your package, there," he cautioned, and the other turned with an unexcited nod and picked it up.

"I was thinkin' erbout them mule irons," he explained—but it is doubtful if he was so absent-minded as he appeared.

CHAPTER II.

AN UNFAIR GAME.

CYNTHIA MEADE was walking with a lively scorn in her eyes. She was searching the shop windows for a news stand where she could satisfy her mental hunger with a New York paper.

Her shallow mind needed occupation and it was to be had only in the news of what was being done in the world. To her, the world meant New York and New York meant Broadway; Broadway, that is to say,

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in its generic aspect of febrile sophistication in brains that chronically run a mental temperature.

Like one who had become wedded to the delusion that the only active people are those with St. Vitus dance, he was feeling marooned here in the enforced quiet of Asheville. That it was scenically one of the world's wonder places carried no thrill to her soul—if she had a soul.

The idea that people of wealth and discrimination from her own adored metropolis came here from choice she repudiated in disbelief. If they left a place like that for a place like this, it must be because the poor fish were tubercular and driven by their misfortune into exile.

For the brooding and superb dignity of the ranges that pitched their purple heights against the sky, she had no emotion whatever beyond a realization that she would go to-morrow somewhere into their ruggedness "on location." She would go there for the shooting of those few scenes in the picture in which she had a small and inconsequential part.

Let sick people come here if they must. It made her sick to come. She devoutly wished she had not come. She might be feverish and distempered in her brain, but her young body was brimming with superb health, and it was as magnificent a young body as the brain that inhabited it was trivial.

Passing eyes turned for a second glance at her, and she accepted this sniping scrutiny as a rightful tribute to her beauty, not realizing at all that it was less due to admiration than amusement for the bizarre exaggeration of her street makeup and the challenging indecorousness of her dress. What admiration there was, was purely animal and entirely, if not purely, sensual.

Yet for all the sleazy and overdone cheapness of her finery, for all the overlying stucco gaudiness of painted cheeks and carmine mouth, there was in this girl herself, or would have been if it had been left unspoiled by artifice, a flaming vividness and a breath-catching beauty.

Jock Harrison walked meditatively a half dozen paces behind her until she turned off of Patton Avenue at the post office corner into Haywood Street. His eyes held a flickering amusement, and although he had been walking with a deliberate detachment of manner he lengthened his stride a little now and, as he came abreast of her, fell into step at her side.

"Hello, Little Bright-Eyes," he accosted her with a patronizing mockery. "This is quite a coincidence—meeting so far from home—isn't it?"

The girl did not alter her pace, and as she looked about at her uninvited companion there was a cool defiance in her eyes; a defiance of unwelcome tinged with anger.

"It isn't any coincidence at all, if you ask me," she replied inhospitably but quietly. "If you ask me, it's a case of butting into my affairs and following me without being asked."

The man smiled. "You didn't tell me you were leaving town," he suggested softly.

"Why should I?" she inquired in a level tone. "What do you think you are—a probation officer? I thought I'd have a little vacation from you down here in this hick burg." She paused, and demanded with a mounting anger: "How did you find out where I'd gone?"

"Aren't you putting a rather flattering aspect on the matter—flattering to yourself, I mean?" He smiled again with a proprietary self-assurance. "Isn't it likelier that business brought me on a twenty-four hour railroad jump than just the hunger to feast my eyes on your young beauty and my ears on your silver voice?"

"I'd get more kick out of thinking you'd stayed away altogether," she announced with a prompt repudiation of his suggestion. "But I know your stuff. I know you snooped around and found out where I'd gone, and then you trailed along. What I want to know is *how* you found out."

Harrison's eyes narrowed into predatory slits, but he kept his voice free of irritation.

"If you want to know," he told her ironically, "you wouldn't have got this job at all except for me. I told Wolf that you could handle a small part. I recommended you. That's why the agency sent for you. That's why you're here working in this triple-star, supremely important super-feature."

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The girl glanced up quickly. The gray-green of her fine eyes flashed abruptly and her too brightly painted lips curled.

"I'd half guessed that," she said shortly. "But I didn't stop guessing there. There was a part in this thing I could have eaten up and I asked for it. Did I get it? I did not. Maybe, since you know so much, you know why I didn't get it."

"Perhaps, dearie," he answered easily, "it was because the casting director didn't realize, as well as you did, your transcendent fitness for a bigger role."

"Perhaps—and perhaps not," she flared out at him. "No, when you told your friend Wolf to do this much for me—when you came around doing the Santa Claus act with your cheap little candy cane, you saw to it that he shouldn't put anything better in my stocking."

Cynthia drew her breath between her teeth in a quick and furious little gasp.

"You knew," she went hotly on, "that if I got a chance—a real chance—I'd make good. You know I have the looks and the ability. You know I'm willing to work. You knew, too, that if I got a real chance, I'd tie a can to you—and you saw to it that this gang of pirates just teased me along."

"Such is gratitude," sighed the well groomed man with the handsome but somewhat dissipated face, who walked at her side. "Scorn for the little boost because it wasn't a ready-to-wear career. A fine young hate on me because I didn't get you starred. Wolf has his own ideas when he hires his people. I call it damned decent of him to do what he could."

"I could have eaten up that other part," she repeated stubbornly. "And it would have made me. Maybe you knew that, too. I suppose you read the continuity?"

"Perhaps."

"Yes, and you headed me off. You black-balled me, didn't you? It's your old game. I know your rotten mind inside-out.

"You think if you keep me dangling long enough—if you can break my heart with discouragement before I make good, I'll give up and drop off the tree—and when I drop you'll be there with your little basket to catch me."

She stopped dead still on the sidewalk, and for a moment the man whose outward seeming, except for the fact that he was walking with a too-flashy woman, was conservative, experienced an apprehensive pang. She appeared on the verge of making a public scene. He knew the storm signal of that mounting temper of old, and he dreaded it.

Cynthia clenched her small fists and her gray-green eyes blazed. Her red head of bobbed hair seemed to blaze, too, and for an instant her anger was the uncensored fury of the gutter-child.

"You—you damned low-life!" she exclaimed.

"And when you drop—and I catch you in my basket," announced the man with deliberate and insulting softness, "there won't be any change in you except that you'll be doing physically what you've always done mentally. You'll merely be playing the game out instead of teasing and quitting, that's all. You'll be giving something for something, instead of just grafting—and now since we've exchanged compliments, let's go somewhere and have a cup of tea."

"No, thank you. I don't want tea, and if I were perishing for it, I'd rather die than have it with you."

"'Rags are royal raiment'—eh?" The man stood looking down on her, and if there was a dawning of anger in his mood, it was only for the circumstance that her fury here on the sidewalk threatened him with an unpleasant conspicuousness. "What's the idea of pulling the affronted virtue stuff, Cynthia? There are no illusions between us. I'd never have known you if I hadn't practically picked you up, would I?

"You complain that you've never had your real chance, but you wouldn't have had even as much as you have if I hadn't looked after you, would you? I've staked you and I've never made any pretense of doing it out of fatherly charity. Sooner or later you'll drop off the tree all right, little Bright-Eyes, and I might as well catch you as anyone else.

"After all, I like you—and I've got a couple of flasks in my room. Come on and tear my hair in a less public place. You

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can work yourself up to a more artistic frenzy with the help of a drink or two."

"I've got my own flask," she told him sullenly. "I don't start out to a dump like this without carrying ammunition."

"Still it will keep," he reminded her. "And once gone it's expensive to replace where one is a stranger and alone. Life is so hard on a woman—in a place where she doesn't know the bootleggers. You'd better hoard your little flask—and drink out of mine."

Cynthia had turned her back and started to walk indignantly away, but suddenly she halted and came back.

"You're right at that," she declared somewhat breathlessly. "We might as well have this thing out, once and for all. The sidewalk isn't the place to settle it and I'm not going to tell you where I'm living. Lead the way to your place—but watch your step. I'm sore as a crab."

"Good," he acquiesced. "I daresay wherever we repair for our little chat you can jolly well take care of yourself."

"That's a bet you can play across the board," she assured him with self-reliant ferocity. "I'll take care of myself all right, but I doubt if you enjoy your tea-party."

Into the hotel that stood in grounds of attractive shrubbery he led the way through a door at a passage end. They did not have to pass through the lobby or entresol, and in the ground level hall, where he turned his key in a door, there was just now a sounding vacancy.

Cynthia looked about the place absently, yet with the attentiveness of one accustomed to question her bearings and to memorize her immediate environs.

As she went through the door, which Harrison swung wide, she paused on the threshold and saw that she was entering a sitting room, from which, on one side, a bedroom gave off.

She flung down on a table the hand bag which she carried, and then flounced sullenly into a morris chair as her host closed the door and disappeared with the announcement that he was in quest of refreshment.

While Cynthia waited she let her smoldering eyes travel about the place, and almost at once she found herself gazing into a long mirror that made a fictitious window through an inside wall.

She was, in this instant, prepared to regard herself with the eye of an exacting critic, but unfortunately she was not equipped with the fundamentals of mellowed criteria. The artifice and the vulgarity of her make-up was lost on herself.

She studied the almost full-length portrait that the framed glass gave back to her, and she told herself that none of these screen beauties, whose names and faces were constantly exploited, had anything on her. She tossed aside her small hat, and the bobbed hair of tawny copper flared out around the child face that would have been beautiful except for being cosmetically disfigured.

The body, over which the thin clothes clung like draperies, was slim and as tenderly curved as that of an Aphrodite. Stripped to pagan nakedness or clothed in conservatively considered garments, it would have held the eye and exacted the admiration of a sculptor.

Clothed as it was, it conveyed the rather pathetic impression of calculated enticement.

There was no reason, she told herself fiercely as she studied herself, why she should cool her heels on the lot, struggling for extra parts, or haunt the agencies, begging without success for musical comedy bits, while girls that were less lovely and less industrious progressed toward stardom. There was no reason except one, she concluded bitterly. She was too virtuous.

Such is the pathos of an undeveloped self-analysis. Men like Harrison had, more than once, been willing to set her on the way, for a price. They had always been fatally able to hold her back and thwart and balk her, in default of payment.

She did not recognize that it was less her refusal to pay the price than her equivocal attitude of trying to deceive and use them first that had stood in her way. She could not realize that, in the first place, she had invited such attitudes by leading men on and seeking to gain from them influence and generosity.

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"They get on because they pay the price—those successful women," mused Cynthia wrathfully. "And I don't get on—because I'm straight; in spite of the fact that I've got it over lots of them like a roof."

Harrison appeared in the bedroom door with a bantering smile on his face and with a cocktail shaker in his hands. The rattle of the thing was, under his manipulation, like the invocation of some barbaric rite.

"I can read your thoughts, little Bright-Eyes," he declared with a mocking solemnity. "Beauty and virtue in distress. Pining for the empire of success where others are crowned while you look on unsatisfied."

He came over and, setting down the mixer on his table, went back for glasses. From her hand bag the girl extracted a small silver case and lighted a cigarette. She watched the man from under sullenly drooping lids, but her only response was a low and hostile:

"Rave on. You like to hear yourself, and nothing bothers me."

"You hate me," he continued equably, "because I'm honest with you. I've never pulled a line of bunk about worshiping the ground you walk on. I've admitted I like you. I've staked you, from time to time, and paid your bills. Perhaps I understand you better than you understand yourself. So I see you for just about what you are—an unusually pretty little spitfire who wants all the rewards of a life of adventure and who wants to pay none of its penalties. You have still to learn that you can't have both milk and beef from the same cow."

Harrison handed her one of the cocktail glasses with a bow of extreme and exaggerated deference. Suddenly infuriated, she snatched the glass from him and flung it in his face.

The man wheeled, and for an instant his scowl was dangerous. Then with a sudden change of manner he laughed, and, drawing an initialed handkerchief from his pocket, wiped away the stains of his baptism of anger.

"There is an Eighteenth Amendment, little shrew," he reminded her. "Throw lighted lamps or brickbats or bric-à-brac; but for God's sake spare good liquor! However, here's a dividend," and he retrieved the miraculously unbroken glass.

After refilling it, he handed it to her, and in a quieter but more authoritative voice commanded: "Now lay off the temperamentals and listen to me. Quit kidding yourself with the idea of your great virtue, or else be virtuous."

"What do you mean, be virtuous?" she demanded angrily. "When was I ever anything else?"

"You have never been that—except technically," he assured her calmly. "Because virtue isn't limited to the physical side of life. You think you have in you the makings of an actress. Well, I'll be honest: I think so, too. You're uneducated, but that can be remedied. You're vulgar, but possibly even that can be overcome.

"Perhaps if we'd happened to meet differently—that is to say, on a more platonic plane—I might be willing to get behind you with the big brother stuff and undertake to push you on to victory. As it happens, I didn't meet you that way, and I'm not a fool. You're too light, my dear, to go through the scrimmage and come out unscathed."

After a pause, during which he endured a withering fire out of Cynthia's green eyes, he went on:

"Other men have been nice to you. Why have you picked me out to graft on and quarrel with? I'll tell you. You're in love with me, or infatuated with me, or something of the sort, just as I'm infatuated with you. You rave about hating me, and you run away from me, but you don't run very far.

"If I leave you alone long enough, you call me up. I think you've always had a sneaking hope that you can get me so wild I'll propose marriage. You can't do it, my child. You can get me pretty wild, but not enough for that."

The girl had gulped down her cocktail and had set down her glass.

Now her voice was quiet.

"You say I've played around with other men," she declared. "I suppose you've played around with other girls, too. Why

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don't you leave me alone and go back to one of those others?"

She had risen from her chair and was standing by the table.

Slowly the man came over to her, and as he came she stood rigid until they were so close that he looked down into a face from which he could feel the stirring breath.

"Because, you little witch," he broke out in the strained voice of passion—"because I can't break your spell! Because there's something in you that gives the lie to your damned cheap outside. You've the makings of a woman, and life hasn't ever taken hold of you right to shape your moral contours and stiffen your moral fiber. I'm not the man to do it, but I can't break the infatuation. I admit it freely."

Her breast was rising and falling rapidly, and although her lips sneered up at him she did not move. He was right, she thought. At times his hold over her emotions was hypnotic. This, in spite of her anger, was such a moment.

"And you," he went rapidly on—"you can't break permanently with me, either, because, though you pretend to hate me, you love me in your heart. You can't face facts, and you still hope to tie me and throw me and brand me, and marry me—and, so help me God, you shan't do it!"

He broke off with abruptness and stood gasping, and the girl smiled satirically.

"Why should I be so keen about marrying you?" she demanded.

"Because," he answered, "although I'm a rotter of sorts, you want me. Because there's something in me that makes an appeal to you. I don't know what—probably you don't know what—but it's there."

"If you think I'd marry you," she said slowly, "ask me and see."

He smiled sardonically and shook his head.

"I'm not a candidate," he told her.

Suddenly, in a paroxysm of gusty passion, he caught her and crushed her close. For an instant she relaxed in his arms, then her arms closed around his neck and he found her lips responding to his own.

"Yes," she whispered, "I do love you. I hate you like hell—but I love you, too."

"I'll just wait a while," he said with a deliberate brutality, as he drew away and held her at arm's length. "I'll wait until the terms are easier. The time will come."

Cynthia began beating at his face and shoulders with her clenched fists. Her breath was coming fast and hot and her lips were drawn up over her white teeth. "You low-life!" she screamed. "You low-life!"

Harrison walked over toward the hall door. He felt that he had been a fool and turned his back for a moment of self-collection. The girl slowly straightened and turned toward the window, which looked off across the grounds where the sunset was giving way to twilight.

She stood there panting and shaken, and the attitudes of the two were those of persons who have turned their backs on each other in separation.

Suddenly there was a sharp report, like the blowout of an automobile tire. The girl started and peered through the window with the instinct of determining what had happened. She did not remember any driveway just there where a bursting tire would sound with such distinctness. Then she looked back, her attention challenged by another sound within. It was a groan, and she saw the man who had just held her in his arms crumpled on the floor with two hands clutching at his breast: Those hands became instantly still. The whole body became still. This thing was death, she found herself realizing.

Shot! By whom? What had happened?

Suddenly the hysteria of panic seized upon her and wholly obsessed her. What matter who had shot him? If she was found here, it would be she who must suffer. She was in his room. She was not registered. Even in the motion picture company she had no friends to whom she was anything but an extra.

On her quaking knees by his fallen body she laid an ear to his breast. It caught no sound of heartbeat. In a frenzy of fear she went back for her bag and held her tiny mirror to his lips. It showed no breath mist—but her test was made in a fury of hurry.

Whatever had befallen, she must get

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away. Get far away and at once! She paused to listen, fearful that hurrying feet and a rush of inquiring humanity would pour in to cut off her escape. So far there was none of that.

She seized up her bag and hat and cautiously let herself out of the door. Very carefully she had walked around the figure that lay on the floor—no longer a man, it seemed—only an insensate thing. Palpably he was dead. He needed no help, and no help would avail, but she desperately needed the help of moments and distance.

The hall was vacant, and she hurried to the door that let her out onto the long porch. Here little groups of people sat indolently in large hickory chairs. She collected herself and strolled through them with the air of one having much leisure and little to break the boredom of life. Now she was acting a part in which it would not do to fail.

Once out in the shrubbery of the grounds, which the dark was taking, that air of detached leisure gave way to the panic spirit of flight once more. Wolf, the motion picture producer, knew Harrison. When the alarm was sounded and the chase began Wolf would speak a word or two, and the trails would converge about her.

She must get away—far away. Not toward civilization, which is linked up into a coöperative system, but toward those mountains where a wilderness lay close at hand.

The one thought that dominated her was flight—fast flight—and flight to the hills.

CHAPTER III.

THE SHINING PASSWORD.

A COOL head, inured by experience to the chances of life, would have paused there in the shadow of the lilac bushes that so pleasantly spotted the hotel grounds, and taken stock of the situation. Cynthia Meade was called on now to handle problems with which she was momentarily unable to grapple.

Every thought that paraded across an inflamed panorama of terror joined in a pell-mell stampede which mutilated sanity. Each new idea presented itself to her imagination as a ponderous block of circumstance, building on others to wall her up in a vault of guilt and conviction.

It did not even occur to her to pause now and question what the actual solution of the mystery might be. Harrison was dead. Of that she did not permit herself to admit any questioning doubt.

Even that certainty was a part of her panic. If there were any chance that he was still living, even she could not callously have turned her back on him without calling help; without doing anything to succor his desperate plight. So scurrying along twisted avenues of subconscious thought, she assured herself there could be no doubt of his death—and so there was nothing she could do—nothing, even, she need try to do.

To get away—that was the one thing. An hour or two ago those timber-cloaked crags had filled her with dread and distaste. Now, like a fox whose heart pounds to the baying of pursuit, no tangle could be too thick, no wilderness of forest too full of concealing shadows.

She drew what scant store of knowledge she possessed about this locality from the haphazard talk of the picture people with whom her fortunes had been temporarily cast, supplemented by what she had seen since her arrival here. The town itself, for all her scorn of it, was a city like other cities. It had hotels and estates that connoted luxury and wealth. It had motor cars like those that one saw in Longacre Square or on Fifth Avenue—and the traffic officers, who directed these, were clad in the livery of the law.

Yet, for all the cosmopolitan aspect of immediate surroundings, she knew that back there beyond those mountain walls there was said to be a life cut off and remote. There dwelt a people who were semi-illiterate and who set their faces against encroachment. Of that life she had a sketchy notion from the picture play in which she had expected to be an actor.

It was being made from a book which she had skimmed through on the train. If that book was a true representation, there lived men and women over yonder who

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operated illicit stills far back in the laurel tangles. They guarded their rights jealously with long-barreled rifles; they engaged in feudal warfare, and disliked the law.

Now she must throw herself on the mercy of those rude, fierce folk, who held no brief for police or juries. The story had said that while they set an appallingly cheap price on human life, while they retorted with a rifle shot to inquisitiveness treading too close upon their secrets, yet for the traveler who refrained from such trespass their hospitality was openhanded.

The same authority gave assurance that as the mountaineers answered few questions, so they asked few, and that through the hardihood of the race ran a shag-barked conception of chivalry that safeguarded women in places where men found peril.

She hoped that picture was true, because to its frail warranty she was about to trust her life. Fugitive from a civilization which, to her disordered wildness of thought, was a human system dominated by a hangman, she was plunging for sanctuary into the utterly unknown. She was turning to a life of which she had one portrayal—a depiction contained in a novel whose author, in writing it, had kept one eye fixed on moving picture possibilities and concepts, and no eye at all fixed upon the verities.

It is as well that Cynthia did not know upon what a superficial authority she was depending.

But to get into those hills! She was now at the center of the town, and between this spot and the hinterland lay successive zones of suburb and private estate, of metaled highways where motor traffic swept in seemingly endless current—of ragged and nondescript border country.

Soon the search would start. As soon as the body was discovered, that search would swing into its full and irresistible headway with forces gathering and multiplying at its back—and she would be its victim. She would be the victim because she would, at first glance, fit logically into an assumption of guilt. The inquiry would then pause—the trail grow cold—and the prosecutors would hold on to her, esteeming one defendant in the hand worth two in the bush.

She had read of people being "framed" because the enforcers of the law must make a substantial showing of success. She must be away from here at once—before, in the sense of its modern equivalent, the gates of the city closed and the drawbridges swung up.

Cynthia Meade was in a mania of terror. Frenzy was paralyzing a mind which, for all its shallowness, in normal conditions was shrewdly keen. She was driven by furies of nightmare horror, and all her perceptions, thoughts, instincts, came back to the hammering reiteration of one refrain—"flight to the hills—flight to the hills!"

To-morrow morning, when the company came together to start on location, even so unimportant a member as herself would be missed. Then, even if the links had not before been drawn together, Wolf, the picture producer, who had appeared to be unaware of her existence when she sought to emphasize it, would find her immensely important.

He would know, as others did not, that this girl had been a protégée of the dead man's; that they had been together; that one was dead and the other gone. It behooved her to be far away before that discovery was made, before questions were asked.

This was all the sheer folly of disordered fright, and even Cynthia would have known it in a saner mood. The one circumstance that could link her perilously to the crime was this very flight she was undertaking. Had she stayed and stoutly asserted the facts, she would have thrown the burden elsewhere.

Had she even stayed and held her tongue, it is doubtful if any one could have testified that she had gone with Harrison to his room. But this phase of the matter she could not consider, or could consider only to reject it. It seemed to her that every one in Haywood Street must have seen the two of them walking together—must have seen her stop on the sidewalk and clench her fists and call the man an ugly name.

Except for casual acquaintances in the cast, some of whom had already evinced a catty dislike of her, she knew not a soul

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in this city. She could not think of a friend in the whole sovereign State which would have the task of putting her into the prisoner's dock and trying her for her life.

But over there " back of beyond," where the mountains were broken ramparts, she had heard some say that State lines came together in ragged spurs like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle. She had a vague idea that once across a State boundary one gained an initial advantage against prosecutors. People could fight extradition, if the worst came. That was all for later consideration. The thing now was to get away—far away and speedily.

She did not even dare go to her lodgings for her suit case, or to change out of the clothes she wore; a sleazy finery absurdly unsuited to mountain travel. That room was shared by another girl, and the girl might be there. At a question she felt she would shriek. At the requirements of conversation she would begin raving.

She turned after a deeply long breath, seeking to crush out of sight her facial betrayal of fear, as one hastily crowds rumpled and untidy things into a chest and slams down the cover. Then she went out again to Haywood Street, walking carefully, assuming a nonchalance that might not transform her conspicuously from what she had been before the moment that had changed everything.

Harrison had been right. She had in her the makings of an actress. Now she was giving a performance that proved intrinsic ability. With a conflagration of terror running destructively through the whole fabric of her consciousness, she still carried herself with the cool, deliberate slouch of a bored flapper.

Every few steps she had to conquer anew the impulse to break and run—and to scream as she ran, but she went on with an impudent half smile on her painted lips, a picture of human vacancy.

After walking a while she came to a cross street that seemed a quieter byway. The houses facing on it were, in many instances, unlighted and looked like feed establishments and produce stores. Into it Cynthia turned, her ears still tense for the general outcry which her alarm predicted.

One could not plan definitely in surroundings of utter strangeness. One could only make wild haste, trusting to instinct, seeking concealment, hurrying and doubling as the rabbit and the fox do when the chase is on. But the rabbit and fox are born to that necessity, and react to the needs and the experience of countless generations trained in the same school.

This girl came from a city where six million souls lived a collective life which encroached on individual action and became dependent on a thousand complexities —a life that stifled independence when the call came to stand alone or run alone.

Now she turned into the less traveled street only because it seemed darker and quieter, only because she felt that there she could catch her breath for a few moments—and yet her inward urge spurred her steps almost to a run.

Soon the side street betrayed her.

She saw a burst of electric glare just ahead and found herself standing with a brightly lighted drug store at one side, an equally garish moving picture theater just across the way, and before her Pack Square, the central nucleus of the town. That open area clanged with trolley cars that centered here from every radiation of the system's web, linking all the places, urban and suburban, that were served by the enterprise of a growing city.

The light of Pack Square, even here at its less crowded end, seemed to beat upon her sensitiveness with the painful intensity of the Kleigs when a studio scene is being shot and when the ghastly blaze stabs at the eyeballs. To the fear-appalled spirit whose windows were these throbbing eyes, the publicity appeared as intensified as if this were in actuality a studio set.

To her fancy it seemed that the camera man had his instrument trained on her, and the director was yelling through his megaphone: " Register despair! Register that every one thinks you've just killed a man, and you can't prove your innocence."

There was a strangling gasp in the girl's throat, but seeing a man pause and look at her, she stood indolent for a moment, forcing into her face the blankness of a bored indifference.

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The man, who had stopped near her, was heavy of stature and heavy of feature. He looked like a traveling salesman, but he thought he knew his world and inferred that such costume and make-up denoted the offer of casual companionship in a strange town.

"Hello, Cutie!" he accosted her genially. "How about taking in a picture show?"

He had drawn alongside now, and Cynthia noticed with the insistence of absurd detail, that although his clothes were not shabby, his belt and patches of silk shirt showed under the side flaps of his waistcoat.

"I guess you've made a mistake," she said with a heavy dignity. There was no time to be wasted now in giving him the disdainful sort of turn-down that she would have preferred. Dignity was the cue, and with a flash of positive genius she drawled: "I reckon you don't know the South very well—or its women. That policeman over there—"

The man was gone, and a laugh of sheer hysteria sought to break outward through the girl's tight throat. Even to her the grim humor of suggesting an appeal to the police seemed infinitely ironic. It proved, though, that now she could play a bluffing hand.

There was no time for worrying about would-be mashers. She was in one of the most public spots in the town, and the vital thing was to get out of it. For only so long a time could she go on acting out this calm indifference when her emotions were seething like lava. For only so long a time could she carry this effrontery before getting off the lighted stage and collapsing in the wings.

Now that she was here, and the street cars were here, the best move appeared to be to grab a car. Here came one now, and it was going west. Her eyes could not read the sign that told its destination, despite their seeming clarity. Of her eyes just now she was making objects to be seen, and not to see; screens, and not windows; agents to deceive, and not to inform. For such things as a car placard they were, to all intents and purposes, blind.

The thing was headed west. That was the point. There was enough afterglow over the shaggy poll of Sunset Mountain, over there, to prove that; and every one knew that as the east stands for civilization, so the west connotes the wilderness. That was her direction, and here was her conveyance. She crossed the tracks and climbed aboard, and, with a sigh of relief, realized that so soon as it had left the square behind the track pointed along a dipping and climbing street where the lights were spaced to a rarer frequency.

She could never remember much about that trolley ride. She knew only that she was being jerked and jolted through wastes of blind agony. The terror had brought a physical as well as a mental nausea. Her head spun to a vertigo, and she rode with her teeth clamped and her hands clenched, yet striving to sit straight and look untroubled. It seemed to the refugee that her features had set like cement or like the face that has compelled a certain expression in the throes of death so that it shall remain unchanged when *rigor mortis* has put a period to the flexibility of nerves and muscles.

Vaguely at last she heard a pleasantly drawling voice coming softly through space: "This is the end of the line, lady. Are you ridin' back with us?"

With a start and an attempt to smile, which she felt to be a grimace, she arose, achieving the feat with great effort, and left the car.

Night had come down like a blanket now, and as she stood on the small platform where the car line made its loop she was looking off into a darkness in which a mountain loomed only as a gigantic shadow a little heavier than the general shadow which made up the west. Spots of light, here and there, proclaimed scattered houses growing sparser as they went up the slopes.

But there seemed to be a road running toward unlit obscurity—a road which was not metaled and which did not break into stripes of white glare with the frequent onrush of motor headlights. The road looked to her as if it plunged straight from the end of the rails into the other world of which she had read in that novel, which was

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her one standard of information. She could not guess that it was one some few miles long, giving a steep short cut to another broad and metaled thoroughfare that reached smoothly toward Tennessee—a ragged filament clinging to the Dixie Highway.

Into it, staggering a little now with the grogginess of suppressed excitement, and walking as unsteadily as a drunken wench, Cynthia Meade set her steps as if into a Rubicon of blackness. Soon she paused and let the pent-up stress of her soul run out in a sobbing moan of relief. For a little while it seemed to her that she had obliterated herself, that she had reached a refuge of obscurity, and had locked a door against the world.

It was as if she had gained the boon of invisibility.

But that was momentary.

A road like that exists only because it is steep and rutty. A short cut, that only slow teams can pantingly manage, is no easy thoroughfare for a young woman, however lithe and strong, who walks on the absurd little stilts of high-heeled slippers, and who is clad in the sleazy gossamer of a costume that is easily shredded by brier and thorn.

After a stumbling half hour Cynthia sat down and cried. Already she had turned an ankle, and though it had not been sprained, it had given her pangs of pain and the deeper pangs of realizing her inadequacy to face what lay ahead of her—as yet hardly tasted.

Before she could bury herself in the forested hinterland, where dwelt the people to whom she was fleeing, she must cover a score or more of miles that were worse than this beginning—and she saw now that if this sort of thing kept up she would reach them with her thin clothes stripped to tatters, or as naked as a Lady Godiva. Not only must she hurry, but also she must grope along carefully, straining her eyes and feeling her way.

Then the greater fear, like a wolf preying on its fallen pack-mates, devoured lesser alarms. The urge of putting space between her and the town whose lights hung in the easterly sky consumed pain, weakness, every lesser thing, and she arose and stumbled on with an increasingly reckless haste.

It seemed to her that for hours she went like that, stopping to pant, blundering into tree trunks and rocks—sometimes being violently tripped and thrown, then rising sobbingly and forging ahead once more.

Perhaps in reality she had covered four miles.

But in a few hours she had been through a century of anguished dread and a purgatory of shock. She had eaten no food since noon. The high heel of one slipper had turned sidewise and then had broken loose. She had carefully put it in her hand bag. Now she was limping with one foot stilted and the other flat. Her stockings of sheer silk had been scratched into runs and tears, and the legs under them smarted and bled.

In sensible clothes and by daylight she could have done the same thing as a hike, and done it cheerfully. Now she was dangerously close to collapse—on the very threshold of her enterprise.

She went on, blundering more and more, and beginning to dread what lay ahead almost as much as what lay behind. There came moments when it seemed almost easier to turn back. That at least was known. Even the police would take her to jail in a motor-driven patrol wagon.

But she brushed those misgivings aside with savage obduracy and plodded westward. A human being fleeing for his life may falter, but the spur of instinct drives him on. Twice she stumbled and seemed to wrench every muscle in her body. The third time she lay for a while sobbing softly in a tide of weak self-pity. Then she swore a little and clambered up and went on. Her young body was strong, but her mind was demoralized and its weakness spread contagiously to her muscles.

But the fourth time she caught her foot in a stiff root that reached out tremendously on the broken way, and when she went down her head struck something hard. She lay where she fell.

She was not quite insensible, and yet not quite conscious.

Either in actuality or in a troubled dream

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—she did not know or inquire which—she saw a small spot of light that appeared to come slowly closer, as tediously as a glow-worm.

She felt the need of rising and crawling back into the timber, but a large and impersonal languor had overwhelmed her. She did nothing, and in the stargleam the smudge of dull light made its slow approach.

With that approach might come anything—yet at the moment any effort to escape its menace was as impossible as it sometimes becomes in nightmare to run from calamity. She had come this far with a supreme effort, and now at the first approach of tangible danger she found herself helpless. Groping in the shadowy half consciousness of one stunned, the girl sought to focus—to revitalize—her energies for one move more, but like a guttering candle flame her self-defensive consciousness flared and went out. She was insensible.

Her next moment of anything like clear perception was when she saw a human shape looming over her, grotesquely magnified and distorted by the wavering light of a lantern held close to her face, and heard a voice exclaiming:

"Afore God, hit's a woman! An' hit ain't no mounting woman!"

Cynthia Meade held her breath until it almost suffocated her. Here in the person of a rough countryman stood the figure of fate. Here might be deliverance, protection—or the power to turn her back into the hands she sought to escape with the ruthless ease of tossing a rat to a terrier.

In the flicker from the yellow lantern the girl could make out, in the road, the shape of a wagon with a canvas top stretched over arching supports. In the streets of Asheville she had seen several of these same strange vehicles, and they had appeared as out of place among the limousines that swept by them, as high-pooped galleons riding at anchor in the shipping of a modern harbor.

The flare fell, too, on the face of a man who held the lantern, and in that deceptive lighting he looked gigantic, formidable.

But the face was, on the whole, reassuring. There was a kindliness in the eyes and a lean strength of jaw and feature that declared generosity as well as granite-firm boldness. At all events, his one utterance had been in the dialect of the mountaineer. Sooner or later she must throw herself wholly on the mercy of such a hillsman. That was the essence of her plan. The chance was no more perilous now than it would be later.

He was holding a flask in his hand, and as she looked up, wide eyed, he knelt down without a word, slipped an arm under her shoulders, and pressed the thing to her lips.

"Ye seems plum spent," he announced briefly. "Don't aim ter talk none yit a while. Jest take a long swig outen this."

As if a liquid fire had been poured between her lips, she gasped and coughed, then felt the potent liquor delightfully tempered below her spasmodic throat, warming and reviving her arteries and soothing the nerves that had seemed dead.

Meanwhile the man said nothing more. But when she arose unsteadily to her feet and he saw that she could stand, he spoke gravely:

"I don't know what manner of mischance befell ye, ma'am, an' I hain't a-seekin' ter question ye none. But I kain't handily leave ye hyar ter perish by ther roadside." He broke off, and then went on again with a trace of impatience in his voice. "An' yit I reckon ye belongs back thar in Asheville town, an' I'm headed t'other way."

He shook his head and added doggedly: "Thar hain't nuthin' else fer hit. I've p'intedly got ter head round ergin an' fotch ye back ter town."

A flood of unspeakable fears rushed afresh on the girl. She must not go back to town, and yet what could she tell this man? There appeared one effort only worth making, and that effort was to throw herself completely and unequivocally on his mercy. She had hoped to be farther away from the city before she cast the dice—but she could not govern fate.

"No, no!" she exclaimed, clutching spasmodically at his arm. "I can't go back. It would mean death. Death, I tell you! Which way are you going?"

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"I'm a-faring a longish distance over inter Kaintuck," he informed her gravely. "But thet's a kinderly rough land—an' I don't reckon hit's no place fer *you*."

"Let me go with you," she pleaded, still holding desperately to the forearm, which under her clutching fingers had grown as hard as rawhide bound over steel. "For God's sake, let me go with you—it's life or death to me!"

The words were few, but they came with a vehemence of despair, and the eyes in the lantern's light were those of one who looks up, drowning, out of deep water. For a long time, it seemed to her, the man stood with eyes boring into her face. She could see that back of those eyes many thoughts were tangled in conflict; that they were moving forward and backward across an area of judgment at once impulsive and cool.

At length the man said slowly: "I told ye jest now thet I didn't aim ter question ye none—but thet was afore I knowed ye sought ter fare along with me. Ye says ye're in some fashion of dire peril back thar. What that peril is, is yore business, not mine."

He paused, and his voice hardened. "But afore I kin take ye on with me I've got ter put one question ter ye, p'int-blank. Air ye decent?"

"So help me God," she said solemnly, "I am decent. That's why I'm in trouble."

The man's head snapped down and up in a nod of determination and of a decision fully made.

"All right, then," he answered crisply, "thet's all I've got ter know—right now. I'm a-farin' over ter ther head of Leetle Flinty, in ther Kaintuck Ridges—an' I goes by ther name of Wade Murrell."

CHAPTER IV.

SPEAKING OF THE LAW.

IT had seemed to Cynthia a long, indecisive moment when she had put her impassioned plea and when the stranger, who called himself Wade Murrell, had stood there soberly weighing it while her future hung balanced. He had said he "didn't aim ter ask her no questions," yet she felt that the steady searching of his eyes had not only questioned but cross-questioned and tried her.

Then had come his one interrogation, "Air ye decent?" seeming to dismiss and cut away all irrelevancies, all the complexities which such a man could afford to jettison, and to summarize the issue into a stark but uncompromising simplicity.

Amazingly swift had been his decision when his one question had been put and answered. Astonishingly free from complication had been the stride of his mind from problem to solution, and in that solution she had read for herself a verdict of acquittal.

Now, after the first surge of enormous relief, came the reaction of physical and nervous exhaustion. She stood leaning weakly against the shaggy bole of a towering pine, and her eyes slowly began taking in unconsidered items of the picture before her as if with returning sight after blindness. It was a picture which had for its background a gigantic bulk of timbered mountain, and nearer at hand the clumsiness of a tarpaulin-covered wagon and a team which stood with hanging heads and shaggily uncurried coats.

But in the narrow circle of lantern light it was the man himself, standing a few paces away from her, who naturally dominated the picture and the interest of the picture.

He was a tall man, sloping wedgelike from a generous breadth of shoulder to a slenderness of waist and hips, and his unsmiling face looked at her out of eyes that abashed her with their seriousness and penetration. Before his scrutiny she felt transparent, and yet he did not seem to stare. Rather, he appeared incurious.

His features gave the impression of being boldly painted on canvas with the sure breadth and unmincing strokes of a large brush. For standing there, almost immovable, with the tricky light of the lantern causing bits of ragged tree trunk and scraps of drooping pine branch to bite into vision out of the darkness, it was all more like a picture than animate life.

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Suddenly the girl, who had been so obsessed with a single fear that lesser fears had been merged, began to be afraid of the wilderness and of this man who seemed a spirit of the wilderness.

She would be riding into the hinterland with an unknown young giant who had about him the strength, the boldness, and perhaps also the ruthlessness of a wolf. Perhaps back of the abrupt decision he had made lay an intent rather wolfish than generous, and as she looked into his face his eyes hardened until they frightened her into violent trembling.

He opened his lips as if to speak, a sudden scowl sweeping blackly over his face, then closed them still in silence. He had been standing with his feet wide apart and his hands hanging at his side, looking at her with unflickering yet detached intentness.

Against that dark curtain of forest and night she was a vivid thing to see, a scrap of living color like human fire. She was bareheaded and the curling bobbed hair caught the lantern light and flung it into a coppery nimbus. Her eyes were of gray-green, like illumined jade, and her features, under their paint, were arrestingly good. Cynthia, when she forgot the slouch which she affected as her idea of fashionable poise, carried her supple young body with the instinctive grace of a dancer. To the man she seemed almost unbelievably beautiful.

He had no power to differentiate between the genuine and the artificialities of city women, between the sterling mark of high breeding and its cheaply bizarre imitation. Here the spurious struck him with all the force of the real, and with such men as he first impressions bite deep.

If for an instant there had leaped in his own eyes a light that had frightened her, it is not to be wondered at, and if she had shivered in a momentary fear of him, that was not to be wondered at either. But he saw and rightly interpreted the shudder.

Wade Murrell took off his black hat and ran his hand through his blacker hair.

"Ef so be, ye're afeared ter trust yoreself with me," he announced bluntly, "ye hain't got no bound ter go on. God knows, I hain't a'seekin' ter over-persuade ye."

Instantly her fears switched again from the minor to the major import. The one cardinal danger was not that of trusting herself to him, but of his changing his mind and refusing to take her. He had appeared to her a shape of rescue, and the thought of losing him stunned her.

"Why should I be afraid of you?" she demanded almost breathlessly. 'I asked you to take me, didn't I? You *must* take me."

"An' yit I seed hit in yore eyes jest now thet ye was affrighted of me," he made grave response. "I hain't faultin' ye none fer thet. I reckon men hev done give women full cause ter feel thetaway since ther world began—an' ye hain't nuver seed me afore. Fer all *you* knows I mout be ther orneriest hellion atter women in these mountings."

The girl's eyes flared with illogical anger.

"I took you for a man of your word," she blazed out with the sudden gusty temper of one whose nerves are overtried and edgy. "You said you would take me into the mountains. If you've changed your mind, for God's sake, say so. Don't try to make me back out of it by frightening me. There isn't anything in your hills—including yourself—that I'm as much afraid of as —as things back there."

"Mebby thet's because ye don't know them hills," he suggested.

Wade Murrell put his hat back on his head with a slow gesture. Then he opened his coat and vest, and from a huge holster strapped under his armpit drew out a heavy automatic pistol.

Cynthia's eyes widened at the sight of the wicked looking weapon and instinctively she drew back a step, but the man twirled the thing on his palm so that the muzzle was at his own chest and the grip toward her.

"I said I wasn't faultin' ye, an' I meant hit," he repeated slowly. "Ef so be ye're timorous ter start out journeyin' through ther night, all alone with a man ye hedn't nuver seed afore—wa'al, I couldn't handily blame ye."

He took a step nearer and proffered the pistol.

"When I gives ye that," he said simply,

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" ye're a better man then what I be, because I hain't got no other weepin' on me, save only a jack-knife—an' thet's got a busted blade. Now I reckon ye'd better git inter thet thar jolt-wagon, because I aims ter fare onward. I'm in haste—but I'm willin' ter go forward or back—whichever ye says."

He pointed to the wagon, and she went toward it, refusing to accept the pistol and pausing for a moment to consider the matter of reaching the high seat over the wheel. Murrell remained standing where he was and made no offer to assist her. Some sense told the girl that, for all his disclaimers, he was affronted at her suspicions, and that, even to help her mount to the awkwardly steep place where she must sit, he would not touch her unless she asked it.

She flirted her bobbed head and climbed up with the unaided agility of a monkey, and as she went the man, who was used to barefooted women in calicoes, caught a glimpse of shapely legs that showed the flesh of their knees over rolled stockings of silk—now torn and spoiled.

" Which way—once an' fer all?" he demanded.

" Any way," she made savagely emphatic reply, " except back."

When she had seated herself, he himself hung the lantern under the forward axle and mounted to his own place, gathering up his reins and flapping them over the backs of the two horses.

For a while Cynthia leaned against the hooped support that held the covering, her eyes, in the duskiness, looking through half-closed lids at the head that was a silhouette of shadow.

" Is the road all like this?" she asked in a low voice, feeling a vast relief in the shadowy protection of the dark and the wildness—in the absence of alarming headlights and the shriek of motor horns.

She saw the driver's head shake.

" Hit hain't skeercely more'n a whoop an' a holler from hyar afore we comes out ergin on a new-fangled road with automobiles ski-hootin' along hit like shootin' stars," he said.

Cynthia gasped and for a little while sat silent, her heart palpitating with a new fear. She had hoped that the hills had taken them.

At length she heard the voice, this time soothingly low, inquiring:

" Don't ye enjoy ter ride highways thet's full-traveled?"

Just as between her involuntary exclamation of fear and his question there had been a margin of silence, so now between his question and her answer another elapsed. Then she found her voice sounding strained and taut—though she was trying stanchly to conceal her desperation.

" No, I hate them," she said, " I might as well tell you. I haven't done anything wrong—but I've been put in a position I can't explain. I don't want to be where there are officers of the law." She broke off, then swept on again passionately. " I give you my word, I'm as innocent as a baby—but I can't prove it."

He made no answer for a few moments, but as the wagon lumbered around the first turn of the journey the rutted road dropped suddenly, and, at what seemed a steep distance below, the girl could see shafts of rapidly traveling light cutting swaths in the darkness. That must be the road of which he had spoken—the road where ended her little plunge into a concealing wilderness.

Wade Murrell jerked his horses to a standstill and clamped on the cumbersome brake. He turned and faced Cynthia, holding her eyes with his own.

" I'm travelin' in ther night time 'stid of by day," he informed her, " because hit's kinderly easier on ther horse-critters an' likewise because ther shortest way ter Cowbell Mounting lays along thet thar road. In the night time a man kin drive handier, because he don't hev ter keep turnin' out so offen fer them automobiles. Nuther me ner these critters hain't none too well used ter them things."

He paused, and the girl nodded her head as if accepting a necessary ordeal.

" Ef we makes good time," the man went on, " come sun-up, we'll be offen thet thar new-fangled highway ergin an' gittin' right nigh ter Cowbell Mounting."

" Is that where you live?"

" Not by a jugful," he answered. " That's jest ter say ther start of ther jour-

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ney, but thet's es fur as this jolt-wagon goes. From thar on, we journeys acrost ther tail end of Tennessee over ter old Kaintuck—an' we goes with one mule critter. We travels ride an' tie."

"Ride and tie?" she repeated in bewilderment. "I don't understand."

Patiently he explained. "Thet's ther only way two folks kin go when they hain't got but only one ridin' critter betwixt 'em—save only ef they rides double, an' most of ther goin's too slavish fer thet. One body rides on a spell an' then gits down an' ties his critter ter a flying' limb an' goes on hoofin' hit. T'other comes along an' mounts an' passes ther feller on foot, an' then atter a spell he lights down an' ties. Hit's jest takin' turnabout ridin' an' walkin,' that's all.'

"Where did you say you lived?"

"In ther Kaintuck Ridges back beyant Big Pine."

"Oh," she murmured somewhat feebly.

"Didn't ye never hear tell of ther Kaintuck Ridges?"

"No."

"I reckon ye hain't nuver lived nowhars save in hugeous big cities like Ashevilletown, hev ye?"

Through all her nervous tension, the Broadway instinct in this shallow-witted young fugitive wanted to break into derisive laughter. What sort of savage could this be to whom Asheville appealed as a "hugeous big city?"

But she spoke soberly.

"I come from New York."

"I've done heered tell of hit," he replied with equal gravity, and it was as if he felt, although he was too polite to express it, a sense of superior information, since he knew of her place while she was ignorant of his.

But if a little fleck of the ludicrous had flashed across her heavy mindedness with that interchange, it went into instant darkness like a shooting star. With his lines hanging and his eyes on hers, Wade Murrell began again and this time his voice carried a note of grimness.

"I reckon fer a gal like you, thet only knows how ter live in crowds of folks an' thet goes dressed up in fancy fixin's — I reckon fer a gal like that, hit hain't nuthin' less then plain unshirted hell ter be farin' over inter a place like ther Kaintuck Ridges —with a man thet she don't know ther which ner ther whether erbout. I reckon nobody wouldn't skeercely undertake hit—ef they wasn't leavin' somethin' behind 'em thet was—wa'l, a lettle bit wuss then unshirted hell."

"I've told you—" she began, but he cut her short with an uplifted hand.

"Don't tell me nuthin'," he commanded. "I hain't askin' questions. I'm aimin' ter tell *you* somethin, an' hit's kinderly slavish because I hain't hed no master great schoolin' in handlin' words."

He broke off and then went on with an obdurate sort of intentness. "I knows ye wouldn't hev tuck up with me this fashion save only thet ye felt plum obleeged ter git erway. Ye says ye dastn't face ther law albeit ye're innocent of any wrong."

"I guess that sounds queer," she began again, and again he cut her short.

"Hit don't sound quare ter me," he assured her. "Hit sounds right sensible. Thar's good laws an' thar's bad laws. Thar's laws thet hit's seemly ter keep and laws thet hit's seemlier ter bust. Thar's laws thet hit's seemly ter keep sometimes an' seemly ter break other times, an' then ergin, thar's laws thet's all right in themselves, but thet jedges an' sheriffs an' ther like kin make a stench in ther nostrils of mankind." Once more the man interrupted himself with a parenthesis.

"I'm talkin' now erbout man-made laws. I reckon no godly man seeks ter cavil with ther laws of God. Ther amount of what I'm drivin' at is this. Hit's plum nat'ral that ye mout mistrust me. I'm a man, an' albeit I don't aim ter brag, I'm a survigrous strong man. Ye haint nuthin' but a gal. Ye starts out with me, an' ef I wanted ter do hit I could make light of ye. Thet's why I proffered ye my pistol-gun—ter ease yore mind. Es fer ther law—ter hell with hit! I don't owe hit nuthin'. I've got a kinsman thet's a jedge an' he's a good man. I've got another one thet's in ther penitenshery, an' he's a good man, too."

Cynthia felt that she ought to say something, but a large doubt as to what it should

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be silenced her. She felt all afloat in unstable and strange waters.

"I stopped hyar afore I went down inter thet highway," he told her, "because I aimed ter make ye understand me if so be I could. Ye kin crawl back thar inter ther bed of this jolt-wagon afore we turns outen this trail, if ye've a mind ter do hit. Thar's some hay in thar that I was totin' along fer ther critters an' thar's a kinderly kiver thar thet ye kin pull up over ye. Nobody hain't ergoin' ter meddle round peerin' inter this jolt-wagon whilst I sets on ther box.

"I'm a right ignorant sort of a man-person, but someways I've done tutored myself. I knows some law. No sheriff ner deputy, ner yit no milishyman kain't stick his nose inter my jolt-wagon without he shows me a s'arch warrant—an' hit's got ter be a plum legal s'arch warrant. So long as we fares along that road an' so long as ye stays outen sight inside thar, I reckon ye kin feel tol'able safe. When we gits ter Cowbell Mounting, I reckon them officers ye dreads won't skeercly find ye."

The young woman with the bobbed head and the absurd Broadway finery leaned forward and laid a trembling hand on his forearm.

"Why do you do these things for me?" she asked. "Why do you take this trouble?"

"Mebby I've done been in trouble myself afore now," he answered. "Mebby I've done needed friends ter hide me out, an' then ergin—" He stopped suddenly and his voice changed. "Mebby," he added, "I'm jest aimin' ter beguile ye twell I gits ye out thar in them hills whar ye kain't defend yoreself erginst me."

"The funniest thing about it," she declared, "is that I'm not worrying about that last thing. I did for a minute, but that's over. You're a good scout."

"All right, then, I reckon we kin start onward," suggested Murrell. "So soon es ye've done laid down in ther jolt-wagon."

As the girl started to climb back he added slowly:

"Ye hain't give me no name ter call ye by yit, an' hit's kinderly handy ter know a body's name.

"It's Cynthia—"

Before she could finish he stopped her.

"Hold on," he enjoined. "Sometimes when a person finds hit wuth while ter change from one dwellin' place ter another fer reasons thet's th'ar own business, hit's kinderly thoughted ter change names es well es places. What I don't know I kain't tattle erbout—even ef I gits swore on ther Bible. Stop an' study a minute afore ye gives me any name at all—an' whilst ye're erbout hit ye mout jest es well think up a pretty one."

"Call me Cynthia Stokes," she said, laughing in spite of herself. Because she was suddenly enveloped in a sense of secure protection, she laughed without restraint, and the man thought it a musical sound.

She was back now in the covered wagon, stretched at length on sweet smelling hay with a tarpaulin where, at need, it could be drawn up to cover her from head to heel.

Wade Murrell handed a bulky something back to her.

"Ye mout put thet under yore head fer a pillow," he said. "Them's my saddle-bags, but be kinderly heedful not ter lose 'em outen ther jolt-wagon because thar's thirty thousand dollars inside 'em."

CHAPTER V.

IN OUTLANDER GARB.

ONCE the wagon had toiled down the rough declivity and turned into the white road, it lumbered along with less bone racking, and with the bed of hay under her, Cynthia Meade's tired body relaxed. For awhile, each flare from the lamps of a passing car caused her to start into fresh wakefulness and palpitation. But the motors always swept by without pausing, and that anxiety gradually dulled until she found herself growing drowsy.

At length, she heard a seemingly strange, shrill voice crooning a song, and half sat up with a start. She had not yet learned how these mountain people, when they sing, change into thin minors that are almost falsetto, or with what a weird sadness they resort to minstrelsy.

But she assured herself it was only Wade Murrell, and she settled back again, letting

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the quavering song serve as a lullaby. That was the last thing she remembered of the night, and through her dreams ran fantastic variations of the verses:

Wa'al Joseph was an old man,
An old, old man was he,
When he wed ther Virgin Mary,
Ther Queen of Galilee.

Murrell had breakfast ready when Cynthia opened her eyes upon a depressing grayness of dawn-mists with the momentarily lost feeling of one who wakens in strange surroundings and is conscious only of bleak forebodings. Then as the train of events which had followed on a single moment of catastrophe trooped back to her memory her heart sank in a sickening depression.

The first elation of escape had ceased now to be everything. Even if she were indeed safe from pursuit, she had bought her immunity at the price of an exile that was hardly better.

Heretofore, she had seen these mountains only from a train window or towering against the skyline from a city's streets. Now, although the morning fog swallowed their parapets in a wet and dispiriting gray, she could feel them bleak, forbidding and monumental, appearing to crowd menacingly upon her and stifle her with nameless terrors.

Even the man whom she had seen last night by lantern light appeared changed in the gray dawn. He seemed more domineering now and more wolflike in the certainty of his strength. It was as though, in his own habitat, he had expanded and thrown off the humility of a strange environment.

To her city eyes, this morning, he appeared rather the tyrant than the hero, and from his back-country roughness she recoiled in fastidious distaste.

When the coffee and coarse corn-pone had been eaten the early mists had begun to lift, and the sun that had been a pallid disc had turned to rose, awakening patches of color amazingly delicate and beautiful. Over an infinity of peak piled upon peak the day was strengthening into a flawless clarity.

To another eye there must have been sublimity in the prospect of this immense unveiling. Ridges magnificently timbered to their tops and cloaked with blooming rhododendron; walls of cliff that had the splendor of palisades and the sparkle of water tumbling into long cascades made a majesty of beauty—but Cynthia thought of elevated railways and sighed heavy-heartedly. These were the hills to which she had fled, but she found them unlike her preconceived ideas and vastly more terrifying.

"God knows," she told herself in bitter silence, "if I ever get back to New York again, I'll never kick at anything. Even the East Side and Harlem look pretty good to me now."

Loneliness like that of a child in an empty house laid its chill and cramp against her heart—a heart that could beat comfortably only in the feverish excitement of crowds.

Near noon Murrell pointed his hand from a hill-top to a scrap of ragged land in a hollow deep below, where stood a dilapidated building of tawdry meanness.

"Thet thar's whar Tom Ike Quillen dwells at," he informed her. "An' thet's whar we stops at ter leave this hyar jolt-wagon an' git our ridin'-critter. I reckon we'll eat us some dinner thar, too."

The young woman's heart sank lower, and the only answer she could manage was a sullen nod of her unreconciled head.

The wagon strained slowly down a bowlder-strewn way, rocking from side to side until the fagged team plodded into a creek bed and followed its course between rank screens and heavy foliage. Down there the air hung damp and stifling.

Then the way straightened and climbed abruptly until it became a narrow, rutted strip of sun baked clay from which one could see, near at hand and with more dispiriting detail, the structure which was their destination.

It had not even the alleviating dignity of the pioneer log cabin, but stood gaunt and squalidly hideous with its exterior of undressed lumber in a yard area trampled bare of grass, but thriving in ragwood and jimson. The only paint this residence boasted showed on its door and window

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frames, and this was a scaling and poisonous pink.

A narrow porch of rough and broken boarding went across its front, and here and there inside the palings, which one crossed by a rotting stile, lay odds and ends of farming gear exposed to the weather and red with rust.

Wade Murrell drew the team to a halt at the stile and halloed a greeting to which he had no response.

"There doesn't seem to be anybody at home," suggested Cynthia hopefully. She felt somehow that wherever else they might have to go, the chances were bright for an improvement over this stopping place.

But the man had jumped down and nodded to her to follow.

"I reckon they hain't fur away," he said. "We'll jest sot us a couple of cheers an' tarry twell some person shows up ter bid us welcome."

On the porch, he left her alone with two kittens and a puppy—all afflicted with mange—and a small pet lamb, while he himself went off to unharness and stable the team.

Cynthia sat gingerly in a broken rocker. The reeking uncleanliness of the place nauseated her with its attack upon eye and nostril. Already in the face of such present afflictions, she was beginning to wonder whether it wasn't better to be a defendant charged with murder in civilization than to be a free agent here. She didn't know whether they hanged or electrocuted in North Carolina, but they didn't exile one among savages.

But she could not go back now. There was no way of going back. She had no money beyond a few fives and twos. She thought with a bitter irony of the thirty thousand dollars upon which she had pillowed her head last night. Thirty thousand dollars which belonged to a backwoods boob—thirty thousand dollars which would have spelled independence to her and made her safe from such things as that which had happened yesterday.

"My God," she groaned, "and they talk about the East Side!"

She looked down at her torn stockings and the finery which was already bedraggled. She glanced shudderingly about at the squalor of this place, and then she opened the bag to which she had so tenaciously clung even after she had lost her hat, took out her vanity case and studied her own face in its small hand mirror.

Sitting there alone in the shadow of the Great Smokies, she sought, according to her lights, to remedy the ravages of demoralizing hardship. She restored the effaced scarlet exaggeration about her lips, repencilled her eyebrows, set little spots of flaring color on her cheeks and powdered her nose—but she felt like a crippled bird preening its feathers among cats.

Around the corner of the house appeared a tow-headed child in a single garment. It stood staring at her for a moment with wide, amazed eyes, then turned incontinently and fled. Around the other corner came Wade Murrell, and at his side walked a girl who looked about twenty, but who was probably fifteen. She was a tall, deep-bosomed girl with a comeliness as full and transient as that of a morning glory; the brief beauty of womanhood nurtured in drudgery and doomed before its blossoming.

"This is Tom Ike's youngest gal, Ivy," began Murrell. He stopped abruptly and stood staring at the woman he had taken under his protection. She knew that he was taking in the transformation of her hasty make-up and she read a sudden gusty blackness in his eyes.

Whatever were the thoughts that gave birth to that scowl, he repressed them and went on where he had broken off. "Ivy's accounted ter be ther purtiest gal along this hyar creek—but she's barefoot, though."

The mountain girl looked at him in surprise. "Why wouldn't I be barefoot?" she inquired. "Hit's summer time, hain't hit?"

The man laughed and put a question of his own.

"Whar's yore mammy an' pappy?"

"Mammy, she's pickin' a bait of salat," came the response in a matter-of-fact drawl. "An' pappy, he's hoe-workin' in ther corn patch. I reckon they'll be hyar d'reckly. Thar comes mammy now."

A raw-boned, elderly woman appeared

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around a screen of brush carrying a basket of "salat peas," and behind her, as she swung along, trooped a cue of three children, all dirty, all tow-headed and all staring of eye.

The woman came across the stile and up to the porch. To the man, she nodded. At the stranger of her own sex, she looked with searching, non-committal eyes.

"This gal," Wade Murrell made haste to inform her, "is farin' over ter Kaintuck an' I'm kinderly lookin' atter her. She goes by ther name of Cynthy Stokes."

Tom Ike Quillen's woman nodded with a grim set to her jaw. It was evident that here was a specimen new to her experience, and one which every instinct of her own stood ready to condemn, but it was equally evident that she would have regarded it as an affront to Murrell to question his judgment of character. Her only comment was addressed to her daughter.

"Ring ther bell fer yore pappy, Ivy. Thet's ther belatedest man-person thet ever drawed ther breath of life. He hain't nuver been timely fer a meal sence his mammy weaned him."

But when the farm bell had sent out its brazen voice, Tom Ike was prompt to respond, and with him came two younger men—his sons.

The head of the family stood looking at Cynthia with drawn brows and stiff lips, and he acknowledged her introduction only with the grimmest and scantest of nods. In his eyes was a positive bleakness of unwelcome, and as he stalked morosely into the house with Wade Murrell following him, Cynthia heard him demanding angrily:

"Whar does she fare from—Sodom or Gomorry?"

Murrell's reply was low-pitched and grave. Its tone could be heard on the porch, but its words were lost.

Yet five minutes later the two men reappeared both smiling. Murrell, who carried a bottle and a glass, came over to Cynthia.

"Mebby a leetle toddy mout frisk yore sperits atter yore journey, ma'am," he said. "Tom Ike, he lowed he wouldn't proffer hit ter ye fer a hundred dollars lest hit insult ye, but I told him ye couldn't do nothin' but refuse hit nohow. Hit war jest a kinderly charitable offer."

Cynthia wondered whether she was expected to accept or refuse, and decided to accept. Instantly the sullen reserve of Tom Ike melted. He took the bottle and shook it meditatively, watching bubbles form and dance in the colorless liquid.

"I reckon ye've done heered tell of moonshine?" he questioned jovially. "That's honest liquor. I knows because I made hit myself. Thar hain't nuthin' in hit save good corn an' sunshine an' water outen a live spring branch."

"Granny," bleated the smallest and the shyest of the children, conquering his diffidence for the first time. "Granny, I wants a toddy, too. Granny, gimme a little-bitty sup!"

"La! I lowed ther cat had yore tongue," drawled the woman good humoredly. "Ack like a gentleman an' I'll give ye a lettle."

From the door Ivy's voice interrupted the convivialities.

"Come in an' eat," she gave summons.

"La! Wade Murrell, he's a quare body," Tom Ike's wife informed Cynthia while Ivy was clearing up the dinner dishes and when the "men folks" were all out about the barn. The hostess sat with a cob pipe between her teeth, and she was feeding the pet lamb with a nursing bottle devised from a whisky flask. "We-all was raised up 'longside his folks over thar in Old Kaintuck afore we moved acrost hyar inter Cyar'liny. Everybody lows thet thar's jest one of two-three things kin happen ter Wade."

"What are they?" inquired the visitor with a dutiful semblance of interest.

"Either he'll die on ther gallers fer killin' somebody without no alibi, or he'll drap in a creek bed with a bullet hole drilled straight through him, or else he'll wind up preachin' ther gospel an' fotchin' in sinners ter salvation. But which of them three places he fotches up at, I'd reckon hit'd take ther prophet Isaiah ter foretell."

Casual chatter about the gallows was strongly distasteful to Cynthia, but she felt the obligation of carrying her end of the conversation.

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"Those are pretty different finishes," she hazarded, "to predict for one and the same man."

"Thet's why he's quare," was the prompt response, given with a sagely nodded head. "Wade, he was jest a mid-grown boy when ther Murrell-Skidmore war was goin' on full-blasted—but I reckon thar's more'n one Skidmore in hell right now, thet wouldn't be thar yit, save only fer meetin' up with Wade. Come on a fight, be hit with rifle-guns or jest fist an' skull, Wade, he's in ther dead center of ther ruction. Come thar's a big meetin' with a shoutin' of hallelujahs an' a tempest of ther Holy Sperit—Wade, he's thar, too. He's a mighty man in prayer or battle—either one—an' thet's God's truth."

"He's a quiet enough looking man," observed Cynthia Meade indifferently. It seemed to her that this was the rustic spirit of boasting about petty neighborhood heroes. She remembered an old vaudeville song entitled "He's a devil in his own home town"—but this paragon of warfare and piety didn't even have a home town. He hailed from the tall timbers.

"La, yes," went on the older woman, "an' gin'rally a quiet-spoke man, too. They norates thet ther madder he gits ther quieter he gits—an' when he gits plumb still like, hit's right heedful ter tread soft. Thar's a long scar that runs acrost one temple up close ter his hat brim. A Skidmore bullet breshed along thar when Wade, he was still a boy—but land's sakes, I'm a strayin'! Thet hain't what I started out ter tell ye erbout nohow. Ef so be ye're goin' to dwell over thar along with ther Murrels, jest watch thet thar scar—an' when hit turns kinderly white—don't contrary him no further."

The girl raised a hand which on yesterday had been fastidiously manicured, and masked a little yawn.

"I'm afraid I don't get much kick out of hearing what a dangerous man Mr. Murrell is," she said indifferently. "I watch my step with all men, as far as that goes, and I usually see to it that they watch their step with me."

The old wife laughed almost silently.

"Wa'al, I'm jest a counsellin' ye betimes," she reminded her guest. "Thar's one thing as sartain es God's own word. So long es a woman's trustin' herself ter Wade, nobody else hain't ergoin' ter harm her."

When the two wayfarers were taking their departure, the household of Tom Ike Quillen stood with them in full quota by the stile. The children, no longer affrighted, raised thin voices and the puppy yapped.

The city bred young woman could not guess that these same people might have refused her entertainment altogether but for the passport of Wade Murrell's companionship. She did not understand that the mountain code withholds its ready hospitality for one reason which it considers valid, or that to their eyes she was a painted woman wearing the outward trappings of sin and as such more fittingly to be stoned than fed.

But she had come vouched for, and as the two started away, riding double on the mile, the whole tribe waved and shouted the farewells of established friendship.

Cynthia was sitting sidewise on a gunny-sack folded into a sort of cushion over the saddle-bags behind her escort, and though the greasy food and the unclean tins of the dinner table had almost sickened her, the hearty fueling of the provender had started her out again with something like renewed spirits.

Even her eyes could begin to see something of the grandeur of the hills beyond the squalid details of hovel habitation. A sense of brooding immensities somehow stole into her realization and made her gasp. From a twisting road at the peak of a ridge she found her eye swinging out over a radius that seemed to spread illimitable space and color before her. Clouds appeared to move on a level with themselves and eagles on spread wings to float beneath them.

The man had fallen into a silence which remained unbreakable, and when she asked questions his answers were in clipped monosyllables.

Always they seemed boring into more mystifying solitudes, and from backbones of lofty divides they dropped down watersheds into creek beds, where the ripple whispered through corridors all but shut in by chok-

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ing tangles of fern, rhododendron and heavily shadowed timber. The bloom of the mountain magnolia caught at the throat with its heaviness of scent. Then again, the way would climb into gorges, where the baldness of rock walls were licked smooth by centuries of watery tongues.

Yet, she reflected, this time yesterday she had met Jock Harrison on one of the principal streets of Asheville, and to-day Jock Harrison was dead and the law was hunting for her!

If the law had not found her, it was because this silent peasant had caught her away from discovery.

At length, where a small creek bed purred along a gravel bottom, where geese waddled and hissed and small yellow butterflies hung about the water's edge, they came to a shack store. There the man drew rein and dismounted.

"You tarry hyar an' hold ther mule critter," he commanded. "Give me thet thar slipper with ther busted heel. Like es not I kin git hit fixed hyar so's ye kin light down an' walk a spell."

He took the bit of collapsed finery with the heel that had broken loose, and went into the rough frame building.

Outside, the girl sat on the mule and waited. She was conscious of curious eyes bent on her from the open door, but she stared straight ahead and in ten minutes Wade Murrell reappeared. Besides the slipper, upon which a crudely makeshift job had been done, he carried a package wrapped in newspaper which, as he remounted, he held under his arm.

A clouded intensity brooded in his eyes and an almost sullen silence sat upon him, seeming to the girl to make his back stiff with hostility as he rode.

When the afternoon was half spent, the mule, limping and footsore, forded a belly-deep stream and the man came again to a halt on the far side.

He nodded to Cynthia to alight, and said: "We've done crossed over inter Tennessee now. North Cyar'liny sheriffs kain't come over that water onlessen they've got papers. Does ye want ter stop off hyar somewhars an' seek a place ter board at, or does ye aim ter go on with me still further?"

The young refugee's eyes widened into an abrupt dread, and her cheeks went so pale that the rouge spots stood out on them in scarlet splashes.

"I—I thought," she gasped with throat and lips that seemed to stiffen into paralysis, "that you agreed to take me all the way. I thought you knew that I had no money—or next to none. If you leave me here, you might as well kill me—I'm worse off than when you found me! They told me back there that I'd be safe with you."

"Es safe es wheat in ther grist-mill," he replied slowly. "But since we met up unforeseed things hev done come ter pass, an' now you an' me we've got ter hev speech tergither."

The old instinct of distrust and self-preservation swept over her anew. The old feeling, that between the woman economically or actively helpless and the man who can help her lies always the old sex issue, came flashing into her mind and blinded her with futile fury. This sort of man she did not know, and with the shallow sophistication of her kind, she tossed him into a category that she did know.

He had played the simple preserver until he had her in the backwoods far away from any other help. Now, presumably, he would reveal himself as the same old type except that he was infinitely cheaper, cruder.

It seemed after all that what Jock Harrison had been in a Tiffany setting, this yokel, who could pray and kill with equal enthusiasm, was in a five-and-ten cent store edition. She had escaped from the lust of a man to fall into the power of a baboon.

The girl straightened with defiance blazing in her green eyes and threw back her thick, short mat of red hair. Her painted lips curled, and the fire of desperation seemed to illuminate her into a sort of human bonfire that might burn quickly to destruction, but that would burn savagely to the end—scorching what touched it.

"All right," she said in a low, tense voice. "Shoot your proposition. What's the big idea? You bring me to this God-forsaken dump—and tell me we've got to talk. Why didn't we talk back there where I had a Chinaman's chance to do something besides

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listen? But you needn't tell me your idea. I know it. Men haven't got but one real idea—have they?"

Wade Murrell took off his hat and swept the mop of thick, black hair away from his forehead. His face, too, had suddenly paled under his tan and over one eye the scar showed livid; the color of wood ashes burned down to the last ember.

"Ef ye means ye've got any cause ter fear me—or mistrust me," he said, and the stillness of his tone was almost a whisper, "ye're a liar an' ye knows hit full well." He paused, and drew a deep breath that caught gaspingly in his round chest, then he went on with a suddenly mounting passion:

"An' ef ye're got a bound ter sermonize at me erbout men an' women an' straight-dealin' betwixt 'em—then for God's good sake go down thar ter thet spring-branch an' wash ther foul paint offen yore face a'fore ye starts out. Ye talks righteousness whilst ye looks like a trollop."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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AMBITION!

"WHAT am I goin' t' be when I
Grow up—'n' wear long pants?
Somebody's got t' take Babe Ruth's
Place—I got a chance.
We played th' Gaul Street Sons-o'-Guns
T'-day—'n' I made *thirty* runs!

'N' Jack Dempsey is gittin' old—
They say he's *married,* too!
I bet y' I could take his place—
If I jus' *wanted* to.
I've licked some *tough* kids, anyway—
'N' *lots* o' ones like Clarence Ray.

I could go in th' movies too—
Jus' watch me make a face!
I ask y' could Tom Mix do *that?*
I *might* take Bill Hart's place.
I c'n shoot, *good*—ask Mr. Broome;
I shot him in th' sittin' room.

They say: Ted c'n be this 'r that—
I guess it's *me* 'll choose.
I'm wearin' pop's ol' pants right now—
Maybe I'll fill his shoes.
I know one thing I'll *do,* b'gee—
Lick ev'rybody that's licked me!"

R. E. Alexander.

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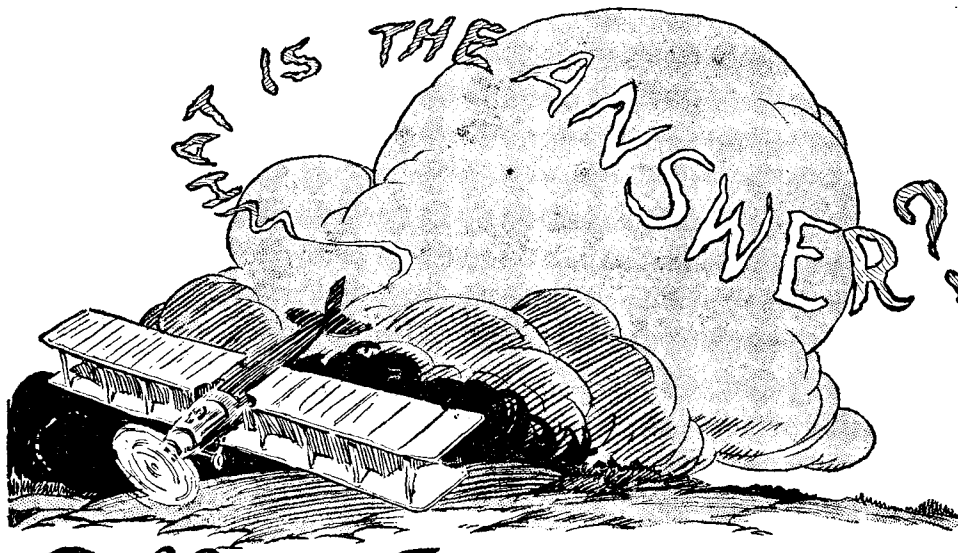

The Answer is Yes!

By JOSEPH MULVANEY

"AND I am to gather from this extraordinary conversation," said Andrew Bennett, with ominous sarcasm, "that you intend to marry my daughter, regardless of my wishes?"

He was the sort of chap who really talks that way. You must know the type—half a century resting its years unevenly on his shoulders; pink scalp gleaming softly beneath a sheer veil of white hair; florid, and spherically inclined; meticulously neat, nearly natty in raiment, with that suggestion of defiance that so often distinguishes a widower after decades of servitude.

Of course, you recognize him.

"Not at all—not at all!" protested the young man at whom the sarcasm was directed. "I merely said I couldn't take 'No' for an answer. It's quite simple. I won't accept a negative, and I will marry Florence; ergo, or whatever you call the stuff, you must advance an affirmative, and the problem's solved, Q. E. D., or SOS, or what have you? I always flunked in logic, but what I mean is clear, I'm sure."

"And what I mean is 'Clear out,' I'm sure," retorted Andrew Bennett, rising. "Do you think I'm a fool?"

"Not at all!" exclaimed the other. "Do you think I'm an alienist? The question is irrelevant, anyway. Let's put it aside. My wants are few and well-defined. I simply seek paternal permission to plight my troth, to encourage this proposed alliance of youth and beauty—"

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"Shut up!" roared Mr. Andrew Bennett. "If any one overhears you, he will think I'm insane, too, for listening to you. Why, you impudent cub, do you believe that because you've fallen into a few thousand dollars, more or less, that—"

"Oh, more—decidedly more," cut in the young man. "Give Uncle Bill credit for not being a piker, anyway. It's exactly a million, and watch it grow."

"If it was a billion," responded Mr. Bennett firmly, as one to whom the mention of money was a misdemeanor, "it would not buy my daughter or my approval of her marriage to you."

"Hear! Hear!" exclaimed the other cordially. "Very well said, but a bit beside the point. I'm not trying to buy either, you know. You spoke of it first, and I merely corrected you in the interests of accuracy.

Yet it's only fair to the memory of my sainted uncle to remind you that a million is not an amount to be sneezed at, even to-day. Of course, it's restraining, almost cramping; but, as I said to Florence when I discussed the future with her, there ought to be a town apartment in it, and, by economizing, a hut in the outer fringe of a fashionable suburb, and then, if and when posterity appeared—"

"'If and when,'" snorted Mr. Andrew Bennett; but he could not trust himself to repeat the ribald phrase. Within a week the specialist to whom he was addicted had warned him against arterial pressure, and Mr. Bennett was vividly aware that the tubes lacked their pristine elasticity. Yet from the condition of his face that moment, his whole circulatory system was in graver danger through the suppression of emotional violence than if he had released his wrath on the object before him.

"Of course," nodded that object, lifting casually—too casually—a snakewood stick from the desk, "they do come still, you know, even now, and in the best of families. Florence was remarking— But I won't detain you longer; it's plain there'll be no agreement to-day."

"Do you expect me to believe," said Mr. Bennett, "that my daughter consented to marry you?"

"Absolutely not!" replied the young man emphatically. "When I asked her, in my feeble, halting accents, if it would not give her a rare and exotic thrill to sign her checks 'Mrs. Bill Hastings,' she said that she wouldn't even think of it until you approved the idea. Hence, as Cæsar said before the pyramids, 'Kosciusko, we're here!'"

Mr. Bill Hastings flipped his velour hat on his head. Mr. Andrew Bennett surveyed him with mingled—you might almost say mangled—emotions and commit no typographical error. He saw, although he would not so describe him, a well-built youth, with a sparsely fleshed frame, a jaw that jutted in contrast to the mild mouth and rather large eyes. They used to say in college that Bill was a deceptive devil. The chin belied the eyes, and there was more power of destruction in that tenuous frame than any one who had never tackled it on the field would guess.

Bill would have been appalled to know how narrowly he escaped handsomeness. The refusal of that mop of rusty brown hair to fulfill its continuous threat to curl was all that warded off the atrocious appellation. So scant was the margin of safety that you might say a hair's breadth—but no, *you* wouldn't. Nor I.

However, that's the chap at whom Mr. Andrew Bennett has been glaring for the period of the foregoing description, and he continued to glare even after the period was typed. Indifferent to the basilisk eyes, Bill lounged toward the door and paused with a buckskin glove on the knob:

"Would you mind repeating the answer, so there can be no mistake?"

"The answer is '*No!*'"

"Sorry," said Bill, shaking his head, "but I can't take it. That's *an* answer, not *the* answer. I'll have to bother you again to-morrow. Oh, pardon—"

He was back at Mr. Bennett's desk, murmuring into the telephone:

"Endicott 9011, please? Thank you."

A pause, and then: "Afternoon, fairest of all! . . . Glorious—and you? . . . Now, isn't unanimity wonderful? . . . Oh, no, he didn't give me the answer. He said no; and, as I explained to him, that isn't the right

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answer, so he'll have to try again. Eh? . . . Oh, I'm sure he will. He's not the sort to let error stand to mock him through the ages. . . . Yes, he's at my elbow, seeking to slay me with a glance. . . . What? You've begun to doubt me already? Ah, well, it's not important. . . . Oh, no, no, no, no—we understand each other perfectly, as red-blooded, ninety-six proof Americans should, instinctively. . . . Yes? Oh, no—I'm running right up to see you. Car's at the curb. Make it in ten minutes—make it in eight for you! Till then—bless you!"

He clicked the receiver on the hook as Mr. Bennett stepped forward with outstretched hand. Bill shook it vigorously. Mr. Bennett snatched it away, snapping:

"Impudent cub I wished to speak—my own telephone—my daughter—"

"My Heavens," cried Bill apologetically, "I never thought! But I must be off. So sorry, but love calls, and you know love—but pardon again, you don't, of course! Till to-morrow, then, and at this hour!"

"He never thought!" ejaculated Mr. Bennett. "Most assuredly, he never did, and never will."

The words formed themselves in Mr. Bennett's mind. They did not fall trippingly from his tongue. He was beyond the power of speech when Bill slipped through the doorway like a draft of cold air; and when the vocal muscles in Mr. Bennett's throat relaxed sufficiently to permit him to express himself audibly he feared to do so. But he stood staring at that slammed door for a full minute, a very full minute, and then he dropped into his chair and closed his eyes. He wanted to convince himself that what seemed to have happened in the hectic minutes preceding actually had happened. Even in this day and age it all seemed incredible.

No need to ask now what the world was coming to. It had already arrived there. No need to inquire where it was going to, either. Its destination was equally obvious. Mr. Bennett lifted the telephone receiver from the fork as carefully as if it were a phosgene shell and asked:

"Endicott 9011."

He waited, and as he waited he recalled the celerity with which the switchboard operators had connected his recent visitor with the same wire. Finally, he heard the repeated, prolonged vibrations indicating that the young woman in the Endicott office was at least trying. After the pressure of the receiver had begun to irritate his outer ear and the vibrations had strained the head of his ear-drum—if there are heads on ear-drums—the acid voice of his British butler trickled through, in response to his question:

"Sorry, sir, but Miss Bennett has just left. She didn't say, sir. She seemed in a hurry. There had been a telephone call for her a few minutes before, sir. Beg pardon, sir, but—"

Mr. Bennett very deliberately hooked the receiver. There seemed nothing else to be done. For the rest of the afternoon the general office of the Bennett Advertising Agency was a distinctly unpleasant environment, not only for its president but for all employed therein and all who entered. Mr. Bennett left for home rather earlier than usual.

Florence greeted him with a chuckle, a hug, and a kiss as he entered their apartment. She was a pretty little thing—but wait! Let's do the girl justice, regardless of space and editorial protests that description should not stop the seething action of a story. Truth is mighty enough to stop anything, and a one-eyed man would pause to look twice at Florence Bennett and grieve that he had but one eye to encompass the beauty and charm of her.

Hair of gold—true gold, not the glaring red gold, nor bloodless white gold, nor unearthly green gold—hair of pure gold, and lots of it, and it curled. No, it wasn't bobbed—at least, not then—but it was softly parted over her right brow, drawn gently back and braided, and it was so long that she coiled it snugly around her head like a shining cap.

Just a moment, for you haven't seen anything of her yet! Eyes of brown, with lashes and brows a shade lighter than the eyes, a shade darker than her hair; oval face and skin of bisque; mouth deep-bowed, not small enough to be silly nor wide enough to mar the lines of chin and cheek; nose—ah, you're wrong there! It

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was not tip-tilted, nor retroussé, nor in the faintest suggestive of Irish ancestry. Nose, regular. For the rest, Florence Bennett was not tall and was not tiny, and there was substance to her figure as well as grace. Oh, the girl was there, indubitably. You'd like her, even if you are a woman; and if you are a man, this world would seem desolate indeed when she passed from your vision.

This, then, was the being that whirled into Mr. Bennett's unresponsive arms, and wasted on him three caresses, any one of which might well have softened the heart of a tax commissioner. But Mr. Bennett was an advertising man and a father. Doubtless he discerned a symbolism in the expressive affection.

"That young cub called on me to-day," he began, seeking to shed his overcoat unassisted.

The girl laughed as she slipped off a sleeve.

"Oh, Bill? Yes, he told me about it."

"I'm glad my description tallies so well with your impression. He told me he was going to marry you, and asked my consent. I nearly threw him out of the office. I mention the incident because he told me you had referred him to me."

She had his stick in the stand by this time and was carefully hanging his coat.

"I did," the girl dimpled. Yes, she had dimples, too, which might have been included in the general description except you couldn't have seen them then, for she wasn't smiling, at the moment. "Bill wanted to dash down to the Municipal Building and get a license, then ask your approval; but I wouldn't commit myself. I sent him directly to you. Oh, I know, he raves a lot, but he'll never ask me again until you tell him you have no objection."

They were in the library now. Andrew Bennett was sitting in the overstuffed leathern chair, and Florence was poised on an arm of it. He was silent a minute, and then he said very gravely, without looking at her:

"Florence, I'll never consent. When that young ape hadn't a penny, he was hard enough to endure, but at least he was harmless. Now that a semilunatic uncle has left him a million dollars, he's becoming violent. I told him 'No,' and he said he couldn't accept 'No' as the answer. Idiot!"

"I don't mean the million means so much to him," said Florence softly, and her arm fell as softly around her father's shoulders. "You see, he tried to give it to me."

Mr. Bennett threw back his head and laughed sardonically: "Wanted to put his money in his wife's name, did he?"

"No; he hadn't asked me to be his wife then. It was days before that. He called one evening and said he was troubled because he had a thousand thousand-dollar bills and didn't quite know what to do with them. He said he only could understand one thousand, and that when he tried to multiply it by another thousand it quite overwhelmed him. He had bet a hundred dollars the day before on a filly named Florence at New Orleans, he said, and the filly romped in as though she were playing tag with the field—whatever that meant. Anyway, Bill made it plain that he felt independently rich with the thousand, but that the million unbalanced him.

"He said maybe there was something I'd like for a million dollars, and if I'd tell him he would buy it for me for Christmas. I laughed at him, and then he said maybe there was something that I wanted very badly that I wouldn't want him or any one to know about—something that I'd dreamed about, he said, and before I knew it he opened his brief case—you know, the old pigskin case he used to use for a suit case?—he snapped it open and emptied the money, 'a thousand grand,' he called it, on my lap, and—"

"He *is* crazy, then!" sputtered Mr. Bennett. "The money has unbalanced whatever fragment of a brain he ever possessed."

"Yes, Bill's crazy," mused the girl; "but no crazier than ever, I think. Somehow, it seemed just like him. I pretended that he was joking with me and I laughed, and he seemed hurt a little. Oh, we talked a lot and the packages of money got scattered around the library floor—there were ten packages of bills—but in the end I ex-

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plained that there was nothing on earth that you didn't provide me with—"

"Ha! What did the young fool say to that?" queried Mr. Bennett.

"He said he knew it, of course, but he'd heard that business wasn't so very brisk in your agency these days, and—"

"So he thought he could buy you, did he? The colossal nerve of the brat!"

"Dad, I've told you that he didn't mention marriage at all that time. I did ask him why he had selected me for the gift, and he grinned and said that I had done so much for him."

"And what had you done?" demanded her father sharply.

"I don't know," admitted Florence, speaking slowly. "When I asked him, he said I had—I had—oh, dad, this is so silly, but he said I had danced with him the night before for the first time in months; and—and—well, he said a thousand grand would never mean anything in his young life after that."

"Crazy as a coot!" snorted Mr. Bennett; yet the narrative somehow fascinated him.

"Crazy as—anything," agreed Florence; "but, dad, I couldn't laugh when he said that. I tried to, of course, but I couldn't, and I can't now. The whole scene was impossible, as impossible as Bill himself; but for all that, when he received a million dollars, the first money he ever possessed above a thousand at one time—when that fortune fell into his hands he thought of me and came around and tossed it in my lap. He might have bought ropes of emeralds and pearls, I suppose, and flung them with a flourish around my neck.

"If I'd have been mad enough to accept such a gift as jewels, of course, every one would have known it a week later, somehow. But he came to me like a kid that brings the first agate marble he ever owned to his pig-tailed sweetheart in school; and he was hurt a little, really, when I wouldn't take it. He explained that it wouldn't be necessary for any one— Oh, well, Bill's crazy, as you say, dad, but I can tell you what I couldn't tell him, and that is that it was as splendid a compliment as ever a man paid to a girl that I've known."

"And you think you love him?" hazarded Mr. Bennett. "Just because he paved the way to a proposal with his fortune? Maybe he is crazy like a weasel!"

"I'm not letting myself love any one, dad," she replied; "but I don't think you judge Bill fairly. When he did propose, a few evenings after, he said he was glad I didn't accept the million, even though he had felt badly about it at the time. If I'd taken it, he said, he'd never have been able to ask me to marry him, because it would look as though he hadn't been on the level all the way through."

"Yes, but he did propose," cut in her father.

"Y-e-e-s, he did propose," assented the girl; "and he didn't seem crazy then. He knelt, too, before me, and asked if I thought there was a chance on earth for him to hope. He didn't plead or beg, or grow eloquent about it. He just said that he loved me and that if there was anything he could do to convince me of it, and I cared for his love, he would like to know.

"Dad, it wasn't my first proposal, but I know it was Bill's; and I'm afraid it's the proposal I'll remember longest. I couldn't tell him 'No' outright, so I told him that I couldn't even answer until you approved the plan. I said we were old-fashioned, that there was only the two of us since mother died, and—well, he said he thought that was a fine way for me to feel, and he would see you and talk it over. He said he wanted to speak to you about going to work, anyway, because he was getting old—"

"Old? That—that—that—"

"I laughed, too, but Bill's twenty-five, and he said he'd learned that he wasn't made of whalebone and wire, and maybe he'd look into the advertising business—"

"O-ho! So he thinks he can break into my office as well as my family with his million, does he?" demanded Mr. Bennett. "Why didn't you tell him you wouldn't marry such a moon-mad imbecile and have done with him?"

"W-e-e-l-l, I was afraid he mightn't take 'No' for an answer from me, either," replied the girl, sliding from the chair arm and facing her father with a mischievous smile. "And anyway, I sent him to you."

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"He's daft as a dormouse, surely," decided Andrew Bennett thoughtfully, and then he added with curt cruelty: "Shell-shocked, wasn't he?"

The girl winced. She had seen shell-shocked service men, but she said slowly and without resentment:

"No, not shell-shocked. Bill never talks about the war, but General O'Brien told me once that when Bill came back he was so full of steel that if he'd tried to go swimming he'd either have sunk or rusted to death. The doctors got all that out of him, though, and the general said they must have converted it into medals, the way Bill's name kept coming through for decorations."

"Oh, ahem—yes, yes," said Mr. Bennett awkwardly. "He was some sort of officer, I recall."

"He was not!" retorted Florence indignantly. "He was a buck private."

Mr. Bennett rose, rather at a loss for a reply. They dined in friendly family manner, and Mr. Hastings's name was not once mentioned. But Mr. Bennett gave him serious thought that night, and when Bill sauntered into the agency next day at precisely the same hour he was informed that the president was too busy to see any one. Bill smiled gently at the clerk:

"Just say that Mr. Hastings has called for the answer; not *an* answer—*the* answer, please."

The clerk stared and retreated to deliver the message. He returned quickly.

"Mr. Bennett says the answer is 'No,' as he told you yesterday, and that he cannot discuss the matter with you further."

"Thank you," said Bill. "I'll be going. Please tell him, though, that he hasn't given me the right answer yet, so he may study the problem further. Tell him that I'll try to convince him, even if he doesn't want to be convinced, and when he has the right answer he must tell me, for I'll be too busy to call on him again."

He bowed and sauntered out, apparently unconcerned. Mr. Bennett listened to the message repeated by the clerk, then gave the problem more thought. The young simpleton was persistent, and the case called for action. Mr. Bennett telegraphed to an aunt of Florence in Stockbridge immediately.

At breakfast, next morning, the girl received a telegram from Aunt Katherine, urging her to come up at once for the skating and skiing. There was not much finesse about the device, but finesse was not Mr. Bennett's forte. He was busily excavating a half grapefruit as Florence read the dispatch to him accusingly.

"Fine of Katherine to ask you," he commented, sinking the spoon into another section of pulp, and half closing his eyes, which was natural enough, perhaps, and which enabled him to avoid the embarrassing glance of his daughter. "Of course, you'll go. Air will do you good and you need a bit of exercise."

"Yes, I guess I'll go. It's odd, though. When I saw Bill last night he suggested that I should run out of town until you—"

"Eh? Oh! Of course you need not stay that long. Why do you bother with that impossible chap? I should think he'd know enough to understand plain English and take himself elsewhere. When do you leave?"

"I'm taking the three twenty express," said the girl abruptly, "since every one seems so anxious. It is odd, though, and not like Bill—"

"Why, it's just like the cub," returned her father. "He called yesterday on me and I gave him the same answer, and he went his way. He saw you last night for the very purpose of urging you to leave town. He hasn't the courage to face his defeat. By the time you return any talk that might rise will have been forgotten. He will have saved his face."

"Perhaps so," nodded Florence. "Well, I'm going, anyway. There's a mystery about this sudden invitation from Aunt Katherine and perhaps I'll find it out from her."

Mr. Bennett shook his head indulgently. Mystery? Ha! Feminine intuition always inclined to the mysterious, in the face of facts as simple as two plus two. He arranged his daughter's departure, kissed her affectionately, and betook himself to the office, where more important matters than youthful folly demanded his attention.

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He squared off at the mass of correspondence on his desk confidently. Business was not so brisk, that pup had said, eh? Where did he hear that? Of course, it had been better, but the city was full of blatant whippersnappers now, shrieking their heads off in wild copy. As soon as they had screamed themselves dumb and the public deaf, conservative advertising would return to its own.

Mr. Bennett lunched, well pleased with himself, then decided not to return to the office. He telephoned his secretary, and rode up to Grand Central to see his daughter off, as a little surprise. He felt suddenly lonesome as the train pulled out after their *au revoir*. He spent the afternoon and evening at the club and retired late.

Mr. Bennett was still pleased with the world when he sat down to breakfast. He slitted his personal mail and glanced swiftly through the bills, but they did not depress him. He spread the *Morning Chronicle* open, ignoring the news articles, but scanning the advertisements closely, turning the pages rapidly.

Suddenly he stopped. The upper half page opposite the editorial columns was covered by an arresting display under this line in large capitals:

WHAT IS THE ANSWER?

Mr. Bennett's mouth was open as this greeted him, and a spoonful of crisp, cream-flecked cereal was at his lips. Mouth and cereal remained in *status quo* for thirty seconds, while their owner with widening eyes read on:

AN OPEN LETTER TO YOU!

If you were in love with the loveliest girl on earth, and she smiled on your wooing—

Would you let any one keep her from you?

If her father said "No," would you give up the girl?

Or would you tell him—

THE ANSWER IS YES!

There was more to it, in the same vein, but what Mr. Bennett had read was quite enough for him. There was no signature at the foot of the crude "open letter," no indication of its source, but Mr. Bennett needed no diagram to trace the origin.

He dropped the paper and the spoon of cereal fell to the table. He closed his mouth, and moistened his dry lips. Red rage surged through his veins for a minute and suddenly was succeeded by a chill.

Whether Mr. Bennett rode in subway or cab or drove to his office that morning, he never recalled. He entered the agency with the feeling of a man entering a court room to receive a death sentence—or a woman going to the polls to cast her first ballot.

He looked neither to right nor left, but strode like an automaton to his private office. Clinton, general manager of the company, followed him, a copy of the *Chronicle* flapping from his hand, a smile dividing his fat face as a chord cleaves a circle into segments.

"I wanted to speak to you about this 'Yes' ad.," he began, but Mr. Bennett with a bleak gesture stopped him.

"And I don't want to speak to you about it or to any one else. Let me hear no more of that!"

The manager withdrew. Mr. Bennett strove to coördinate his mental processes. There would be more of those advertisements of course and doubtless each would be more insulting than its predecessor. No names had been mentioned in the initial blast, but he could trust a pup like Hastings to flaunt names when it seemed necessary. The thing to do was to stop the whole thing and at once.

He riffled through the stack of morning and evening papers on his desk. Yes, as he had thought, every one carried the obnoxious copy, but the Bennett agency business was worth something to the newspapers, too. He pressed the button that summoned his secretary, a colorless, cold young woman whom it was said she had never asked a question or failed to obey an order since he had hired her.

"Miss Simpson," said Mr. Bennett, deliberately, "I want you to telephone the advertising managers of all the morning and evening newspapers and ask them if it is possible to cancel all the advertisements arranged to run under the line 'What's the Answer?' Tell them it will place me under a great personal obligation to them if it can be done and that I will be glad to compen-

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sate them for any loss they may sustain. Please understand that this is important and that the request is unusual. Thank you."

Mr. Bennett decided that it was time for his luncheon. He had to get out of that office, he felt, or expire beneath the eyes of his staff. He encountered two or three general agents as he walked to Black's restaurant, but he ignored their smiles, and rejected their pressing invitations to share a table.

Mr. Bennett was not sociable, as a rule, and less so than ever this day. He lunched long and rather heavily, but he kept his eyes on his food and his thoughts within him and remained solitary in the crowded dining room.

Miss Simpson awaited him when he returned. The newspapers had agreed, reluctantly and with much questioning, to stop the advertisements. Mr. Bennett did not ask about their interrogations. He thanked the young woman as the compression around his heart eased appreciably. The young cub had been checked before he was well started.

II.

Mr. Bennett eschewed his friends for the next few days and frequently used the subway. He did not enjoy crowds, but he had found that isolation was possible in a crowd, or at least one could feel impersonal, almost anonymous. As he meditated, swinging from a strap, one late afternoon, his eyes rested on a very striking triple length placard set between the side and ceiling of the car:

WHAT'S THE ANSWER?

If you were a girl, wealthy, beautiful and cultured and a man whom you might love proposed to you—
If your father forbade the marriage—
Would you agree with him?
Or—would you say for yourself:

THE ANSWER IS YES!

The air in the subway suddenly became stifling. Mr. Bennett cursed the congestion, as he struggled dizzily to the door. He rode home in a cab from the next station, feeling sick in soul and body.

Dinner was a serious and solitary meal. He missed Florence, yet he found a crumb of consolation in recalling that he had sent her away to avoid some such bitterness. At least, she was not being subjected directly to the vengeful insults of the young scoundrel.

Doubtless every scandal-monger on the avenue was chuckling over the topic by now, for if there was any doubt as to the identity of the persons referred to in the advertisements, that cub Hastings could be depended on to reveal the objects of his spiteful venom. Mr. Bennett wondered whether he should write to Florence and warn her, but decided not to. Why worry her, when she would hear of it only too soon, anyway?

He shuffled the little pile of personal mail at his plate, wondering if she had written. There was no letter from her, but at the bottom of the pile a postcard faced him. He turned it over and read:

The answer is yes!
If—

Mr. Bennett tore the card to fragments so small that a cipher expert would have experienced difficulty in reading the message or threat contained on it. Mr. Bennett cursed deep and long, and through his muttered maledictions, he saw the future ahead as a vista of persecution without end. Instead of having stopped it, as he had thought, he now saw that he had merely diverted the channel of insult. Was there no protection for a decent citizen against such a beast?

The possibility of criminal prosecution for blackmail or extortion or coercion came to him and Mr. Bennett pondered it. He might even obtain an injunction from the courts—but such a course meant even greater publicity, and he felt that official recognition of his campaign was exactly what the vengeful fool would most desire.

Mr. Bennett decided to put the problem by, and go to the club. But no, he could not go to the club. He would take a walk, and avoid the idiotic interrogations of his friends. He needed a walk anyway, after what he had gone through in the last few days.

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The avenue was thronged. Mr. Bennett's promenade was virtually uninterrupted. True, Jones, of Bickerman, Jones & Company, the rival agency, tried to halt him with "Hello! What *is* the answer?" Mr. Bennett, breaking into a sweat, replied, hurriedly, "Beg pardon," and did not pause. He heard Jones's remark "Oh, I guess the answer is yes, all right," and then he shook the pest from him.

After that, Mr. Bennett watched the faces of the throng to avoid acquaintances and especially friends. This campaign was beginning to harrow him, he conceded, and it added to his irritation to note that he seemed to be the only person abroad who was unhappy. Never had he seen so many smiling faces, nor so many young people strolling in couples, the girls striding along in tailored suits, flat-heeled shoes and toques, as masculine as their escorts. It was the city of youth.

Mr. Bennett was down in the "splendid, idle forties" before he was aware of it, blinking under the incandescent glare. Here in this haunt of senseless gayety, he felt safe from the insidious enemy. The conflicting beams of light confused him somewhat and he stared at the wriggling masses of molten electricity surrounding him. A great sign on the roof of a building facing Longacre Square drew his eye. As he looked, the huge frame darkened, then out of the blackness burst a furious metamorphosis, like a dragon writhing in a constrictor's coils. For an instant the pyrotechnical battle raged, then the dragon appeared to expire, the serpent raced around the frame, broke into sections which triumphantly arranged themselves in this wriggling interrogation:

What's the answer?

Mr. Bennett did not wait to see what the answer was nor what preceded it. He knew, and to rid himself of the pursuing thought of it, he plunged into the lobby of the nearest theater, as into a sanctuary. He was confronted by realistic photographic displays of young women swinging their limbs—all four of them—high, wide and handsome. For this was the citadel of the "Jollies," that celebrated revue dedicated annually to the magnification of the American maid.

He was not interested in the altruistic enterprise. Indeed, in a deliberative moment and a state of reason, he never would have entered the place, but he was far past the state of reason and there was no time for deliberation. After all, this was the last resort of the tired business man and assuredly no business man ever was more tired than he at the moment.

"Two?" said the shirt-front in the box-office window. "Oh, one! Here you are—seven seventy, with tax!"

The price was preposterous, to be sure, but then the whole world was preposterous when an impudent young blackguard could flaunt his indecent impudence through newspapers, subways, public highways and the postal service. The revue had begun when Mr. Bennett entered the theater. An usher spotted his coupon with a torch and glided swiftly down a side aisle ahead of him, into a vacant box and to the chair closest the stage. Before Mr. Bennett realized how conspicuous was the position, he sat down, and then he remained seated, rigid and frigid.

For the pseudo-South Sea siren on the stage, in all the glory of her bleached bobbed hair, vivid stained face and undulating anatomy, side-stepped to the syncopated orchestral strain, then knelt on one rouged knee, directly in front of him, stretched her arms forward and chanted:

"The answer is 'Yes,' dear,
But I'm in distress, dear,
For I must confess, dear,
That father won't bless, dear—"

Mr. Bennett was suddenly aware that perspiration was streaming from his every pore. If his thoughts could have been expressed, they would have formed one long, quivering, intense stream of liquid fire directed against the brazen young baggage before him.

The hilarious laughter of a half-witted audience rumbled to his ears through the doggerel of the song. Infinitely more humiliating he felt than if he had been tossed half-naked on the stage to caper about with the vixen. It was a scourging

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desecration of mind. It was abysmal degradation. It was the disintegration of brain and nerve. It was the essence of Hades, distilled and compounded in midsummer!

Half the house must know him, Mr. Bennett thought, and the other half undoubtedly suspected his identity. This hussy must have been awaiting his entrance. At any moment, while the frightful singing continued, he expected to shrivel into nothingness or explode where he sat from the emotional pressure. Just as he had concluded that extinction by explosion was imminent, the song ceased, the stage darkened and the bedizened wench slipped into the wings.

An outburst of handclapping rose. Mr. Bennett with a mighty impulse leaped from his chair, seized his hat and fled to the street, coatless and unashamed. He was not going to risk an encore! A taxi was waiting at the curb. Mr. Bennett flung himself into it, waved his arm wildly in a northwesterly direction and sank speechless on the cushions.

The cab swept into Broadway with the passenger caring not whither he was being driven nor whether he returned. He saw himself beleaguered by an invisible enemy who was emptying a million dollar war chest to compel his unconditional surrender.

Probably, he reflected, the unspeakable cub did not know he was going to visit the "Jollies" that night, but it was clear that no matter where he had fled, he would have encountered that abominable song, which must have been 'planted' in several shows. If he did not encounter that, it would have been something worse. But what could be worse?

As Mr. Bennett stared into space through the cab window, a brilliantly lighted phonograph shop attracted his eye. He shivered and slumped back on the cushions. Doubtless, a thousand disks were almost ready to hurl that air through a thousand phonograph horns, for all the world to listen and leer. If this kept up, it was only a matter of hours when the thing would break into the news columns of the press.

When he reached home and his library, he unearthed a bottle of Scottish sedative and flooded his throat with half a tumbler, and he would not have cared if a squad of prohibition agents surprised him wet with the goods. If ever liquor was medicine, this was that moment. He longed to forget the horror of the day in sleep, but he feared to sleep. Morning would come so much sooner, and what might come with the morning, he did not care to predict.

Half a dozen evening newspapers were stacked on the table. He glanced cautiously from a distance at the uppermost front page. The headlines told of "Two dead and ten injured" in an elevated railroad collision. Smaller headlines announced the death of an innocent bystander in a gangsters' feud. Mr. Bennett found himself reading the names of the dead and maimed with vulturine eagerness and he was distinctly disappointed when the name he subconsciously sought did not appear. A paragraph in the corner of the page caught his vagrant attention:

BIG LIFE POLICY ISSUED TO YOUNG MILLIONAIRE

The United States Insurance Company announced to-day that it had recently issued one of the largest insurance policies since the war to William Hastings, who inherited one million dollars from his uncle, William T. Graves, the mining magnate. The amount of the policy and the name of the beneficiary were withheld by the company, at the young man's request. Mr. Hastings has no near relatives, and the issuing of the policy set in circulation a rumor that he is about to marry, but the report could not be confirmed.

Mr. Bennett let the paper drop, resolving to read no more newspapers. He, for one, did not have to conjecture the identity of the beneficiary, and he appreciated the significance of that final paragraph to the utmost. He wondered bitterly why that mad young moron had not succeeded in getting his infernal interrogation into the news article as well as everywhere else.

Mr. Bennett paced the floor slowly, and as he was about to turn back at the wall, his foot struck a cabinet, gleaming softly in the darkness. He surveyed the unfamiliar outlines, curiously. He had not observed it before. He stepped closer, then recalled that Florence had told him that she was going to have a radio set installed.

So this was it. He grinned derisively

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at the inanimate menace. He would not have touched it for a fortune. Well he knew that if he fussed with the knobs and switches the device would begin to function and he didn't want to hear what he felt certain it would ask him. No, this was one piece of ordnance in the conspiracy of that young pup which was not going to be effective. If a syllable came out of amplifier, he made up his mind, he would rip the whole contraption out by the roots. In the morning, he would have it removed anyway.

As he paused in his pacing, eying the cabinet a reaction set in. Mr. Bennett caught himself wondering whether his sanity had been attacked by the events of the last day. The last day? The thought itself was ominous. He took another draft of liquor and slowly, reluctantly, undressed for bed.

III.

He rose early, stood under a cold shower for several minutes, dressed and faced breakfast, quite refreshed. He was nearly ready to smile at his fears of the night. Soft, sun-drenched winds, swept against the window sashes. Mr. Bennett tossed the newspapers from the table and strode to the window to look out at the gloriously developing day.

He stiffened suddenly as he gazed out. Directly across the street on the blank wall of an old building two painters were at work on scaffolds, lettering a huge sign, with big brushes. In its incomplete state, the legend read:

What's The An
If You Were A Fath
And She
THE ANSWER IS YE

Mr. Bennett turned away. So—the campaign had been carried to his very home. He could not run away, yet assuredly he could not remain with that facing him. Possibly when it was finished, his own name or that of Florence would be included in the insulting interrogations. Mr. Bennett pressed his palms against his forehead, and the thought came to him that this thing would end in tragedy.

He did not return to the breakfast table, but dressed quickly for the street and slipped out of the house without speaking to the servants. He could not think coherently there. He walked down town, turned into Broadway, and observed a procession of sandwich men, their boards flapping in the wind from their shoulders. Mr. Bennett hailed a cab and directed the driver to his office. He drew down the curtains immediately. He wanted to think and he did not want to view the signs the sandwich men carried nor did he care to look at any other form of outdoor advertising. Neither did he care to see friends or acquaintances—Mr. Andrew Bennett suddenly realized that he was talking to himself and checked his mutterings.

He stepped from the cab and entered his offices with an aspect of briskness. There was not an employee in sight in the outer office. He turned his head to assure himself that his vision was unimpaired and heard a chorus of exclamations from the conference chamber adjoining his private office. Opening the door of the larger room, his gaze fell on the entire office force elbowing for preferred positions at the windows. As Mr. Bennett entered, a burst of laughter arose. He coughed loudly and spoke:

"Pardon this intrusion—but is this a business office?"

They fell back, surprised, then scattered silently but grinning. Mr. Bennett unthinkingly stalked to the window. Doubtless a steeple jack was gilding the ball on the flagstaff of a neighboring building—but he saw no steeple jack. He glanced casually at the sky.

So high that it appeared a dragon-fly against the blue, an airplane rode, streaming thick smoke from its stern. It soared and glided and dived and rose again bewilderingly. For half a minute, Mr. Bennett stood marveling at the recklessness of the pilot. Then the jumbled mass of smoke took form and he realized that the plane was not afire, for the trailing blur assumed curves of grace to spell out:

"What's the answer?"

The plane dived like a kingfisher, righted itself hundreds of feet below, and began the reply to its own question:

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" The answer is yes!"

As the aircraft rose again and streaked out of sight, doubtless to continue its communications to the world below, Mr. Andrew Bennett came to a decision. He went to his private office, locked the door, and called on the long distance telephone operator for a Stockbridge connection. He waited patiently, and when Florence's voice sounded over the wire, he said:

" How soon can you come to town? This is important."

" I can make it this afternoon, dad," she replied, " but what's wrong."

" Nothing," he lied, " but there's something I want to clear up. By the way, if you can locate Mr. Hastings I'd like to talk to him, too."

There was a pause, and then the girl said:

" I'll try to bring him to the office with ne. Anything else, dad? Sure there's nothing wrong? All right, I'll hurry."

Mr. Bennett made a voluntary prisoner of himself in his office, indifferent to the whisperings that he knew must be echoing through the staff. Toward evening, Florence arrived, hurrying through to her father's room—with Bill Hastings only a few steps behind her.

" Why, dad, something *is* wrong, after all! You're worn out, ill? What *is* the trouble?"

Andrew Bennett made a quick nervous gesture for silence. He felt his nerves beginning to twitch. He must get the thing over, quickly. He turned to Hastings, and without a word of recognition, said bluntly:

" I wanted you both here so that there could be no misunderstanding. I have reached the limit of endurance. You asked me for my consent to marry my daughter. I told you ' No ' and you said you would not take that for an answer. Very well; I've reconsidered the question and I tell you now, sir, that ' The answer is yes.'

" You have my permission to marry my daughter if she wishes to be married to you. Ask her, now—here. But before you ask her, tell her how you won your victory over her father; tell her the methods you used to break down his resistance, the chivalrous strategy you exercised. Tell her it all."

Florence, startled at the outburst, turned from her father to the man at her side. Hastings stiffened and his face paled as he stared at the trembling man confronting him.

" Why don't you speak?" demanded Andrew Bennett harshly. " Tell my daughter of your damnable airplane spurting smoke, of your indecent advertisements in newspapers, electric lights, billboards and the devil himself knows what else! Tell her about your painted women leering from the stage to sing at me that my answer must be yes, and then ask my daughter to marry you, if you dare—you—you—you—"

He swayed suddenly, his hand fumbled at his desk and he dropped into the chair, exhausted, as Florence and Hastings sprang to his side. Andrew Bennett waved them both back:

" Go on," he said to the young man. " Tell her the story."

" Good heavens!" exclaimed Hastings. " There is no story. I don't know what you're talking about, sir. I haven't any airplanes or electric lights or newspaper advertisements. You're tired, Mr. Bennett. You're unnerved."

" Ha? Wait!" He reached for a file of newspapers and whipped over the leaves until the page with the offending announcement lay flat on the desk before them.

" Read that, sir," he said, " to my daughter and then tell her the rest of the story."

Hastings glanced swiftly at the typed half-page then exclaimed as he spun round on his heel:

" Good Lord, that? Me? Why—please call that cold-blooded secretary of yours!"

Without waiting for a response, Hastings reached over and jabbed a button on the desk. Miss Simpson entered immediately. The young man pointed to the advertisement and said:

" Miss Simpson, Mr. Bennett wishes to know all that you know about that copy. He knows nothing about it himself."

The young woman glanced quickly at her employer. He nodded, dazed, and she replied:

" Of course, I know all about it. Every one does. We sent it to the newspapers—"

" We did!" and Mr. Bennett was gal-

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vanized into a standing position by the words.

"Of course," replied the girl. "Don't you remember? Mr. Clinton put the contract through. He went to see you about it to get congratulations but he said you practically ordered him out and refused to talk about it. Then you had me call up the newspapers and cancel the contract. Don't you remember? They canceled it because it was our stuff, of course. But Mr. Clinton had signed up a big outdoor campaign, too, and he went ahead with that, while waiting for you to talk to him about the newspapers.

"Why, you must know this," she continued, nervously studying him. "The whole trade is talking about it. Every one says it's the most enterprising exploitation ever staged. We've had post cards and signs and—"

"But for what?" exclaimed Andrew Bennett. "For what are we being used. Who are we advertising and questioning. Who is paying for it?"

"Why the Twentieth Century Film Company, of course!" exclaimed the secretary. "Oh, Mr. Bennett, you've been ill, I'm sure, and I'm almost ready to cry myself over all this. You must know. They're putting out a big feature picture called 'The Answer Is Yes' and they're beginning their national advertising campaign with us. They've made the title out of a slang expression, turned it into a slogan and exploited it on the stage and in electric lights on Broadway—you must have seen it, Mr. Bennett. Why, we've put it into a song and records are being made and it's going on the radio and you say you know nothing about it! Why, Mr. Bennett, you saw the airplane we hired scrawling it in smoke all over the sky this morning!"

Andrew Bennett's head fell forward on his chest, and remained there a moment. Then he said to Hastings:

"You mean that you have had no hand in this? What have you been doing?"

"Why, dad, Bill's been in the Berkshire Hills with me," said Florence, flushing. "He discovered that I had really taken his suggestion and gone without a word to him. He drove up in his car the same day."

"But these ads," persisted her father. "These questions? What do they mean? I can't—"

"Of course, you can't," laughed Florence, "but every little flapper in the country has been using that expression for months. Of course, you don't know either that Gerald MacHugh is to be starred in the picture as his first feature film on returning to the silver screen. He's an exiled prince in the story who has been driven from his throne, and he wanders into the Balkans where he meets a beautiful princess —why, dad, did you really think Bill was the hero of it or what?"

Bill grinned in embarrassment, then turned to Andrew Bennett who now sat erect, as though he had shaken the weight of the world from his shoulders. Florence slipped an arm through Bill's and drew him to her father's side.

"Wasn't there something pending before this movie discussion came up?" she asked, and Bill replied:

"There was, and I'm ready to discuss it here, as Mr. Bennett suggested a few minutes ago, but when I win, I want to win fairly, not through any one's error of judgment. Mr. Bennett, I would like your permission to ask Florence to be my wife.

Andrew Bennett looked into Bill's eyes steadily and they did not waver under his gaze. Mr. Bennett said slowly:

"I'm not so sure of my judgment on anything, any more. If Florence is willing to be married to you, I have no objection."

Bill turned his eyes to the girl, then. She was smiling, faintly, and her cheeks had gone pale. He lifted her hand lightly, bent over and kissed it. Without relaxing his fingers, he said, very quietly:

"Florence, you've heard your father give his consent to me to ask you to be my wife. So I do ask you, now. All that I told you about myself the other night still stands. The only other thing is that some of that million is gone. I heard just before I left town that a block of Bennett agency stock had appeared on the curb and I bought it. I don't know and don't care where it came from, but somehow I thought it would be better for me to have it than some one else. That's all, except that I'm going to work

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and for your father if he will let me and if you will marry me. You are the loveliest girl I've ever known, and—and—if—but—oh, girl, I just love you, that's all!"

Andrew Bennett cleared his throat, as if to warn them that they were not alone. Over in the corner, Miss Simpson had turned her back but her shoulders were quivering and something like a suppressed sob came. Florence trembled herself ever so slightly, as she turned her eyes from Bill to her father.

"I've said my last word on this question," roared Andrew Bennett. "Do you young fools want me to reverse myself again?"

Florence let her hand rest in Bill's and led him closer to her father, so close that she could bring their hands together, and then tears welled in her eyes but she smiled through them.

"I guess we're all crazy this day," she murmured, "but, dear dad, dear Bill—the answer *is* yes!"

THE END

WHERE HOMAGE IS DUE

A LINE of cars stands panting in the street;
A sturdy, brass-bound officer attends.
This hour each day it is his given beat;
For this the public half his wages spends.
The cars move on—again he halts the throng
That yet nor frets nor murmurs, as a rule,
Although 'tis held from hurrying along.
And why? *A poor man's child goes by to school.*

Bank presidents and merchant princes wait;
Shrewd barristers, wise judges, calmly sit;
Huge limousines like chariots of state
Stand chugging as a warhorse champs his bit.
And all for what? A group of happy tots
Go tripping by, light hearted, calm and cool,
Accepting as their due their sheltered lots—
Some common children going by to school.

Pray why should not the proud and haughty stand;
Why should jurists, merchant princes—all
The recognized successes of our land—
Wait and do homage, a protecting wall
For those whom we prepare to take their place?
He who would murmur—write him down a fool;
A miscreant, to his time a black disgrace—
Halt! *Let the little folk go by to school.*

Strickland Gillilan.

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Throw Up Your Hands

By GEORGE F. WORTS

Author of "Out Where the Worst Begins," etc.

WHAT HAS OCCURRED IN PART I

THERE is a railroad washout in the mountain country, and an old-time stage is resurrected. Spavin Yampdon, veteran driver, holds the lines; the passengers are Mrs. Yost and her grown son, Julius, and her girl companion, Margery Corbin; Judge Oglethorpe, of an Eastern court, and Marshal Sniffin, of a Western jurisdiction. Julius Yost secretly forces unwelcome attentions on Miss Corbin, but his mother blames the girl. The coach pauses on a lonely road to rest the horses, and here Mrs. Yost informs Margery that she is fired. Julius accidentally backs off into space above an abyss, but lands on a ledge, and Margery saves him with a lasso. Larry Wilpin, a young, red-headed cowboy, and Friday Pepper, his old friend and partner in failure, have just abandoned a farm that didn't pay. They hold up the stage, and take Margery Corbin as a hostage; she's to be released in an hour if no pursuit is made. Gory Oliver and Karl the Killer, fleeing horse thieves, are overawed by Wilpin's guns, but are permitted to go free. They encounter Julius Yost in pursuit of Margery Corbin, and order him to throw up his hands. Meanwhile, Larry Wilpin and blue-eyed Margery have been quarreling like lifelong friends!

CHAPTER XIII

THREE WISE MEN.

JULIUS YOST yanked his panting, lathered horse to a standstill, but he did not elevate his hands. His face, crimson from his ride, was distorted with rage.

"Good God!" he cried. "Don't use those words to me. The very sound of them nauseates me. Let me past, you men. For God's sake let me by."

Karl the Killer grinned. "Whut's yore hurry, stranger?"

Yost tried to edge past them, and as he

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did so the long lanky arm of Gory Oliver shot out and jabbed the revolver it held into the ribs of the Easterner. Julius grunted with pain.

"Don't stop me," he snarled. "I'm trailing the man who stole my sweetheart, and when I catch him I'm going to blow his heart out!"

"Ya don't mean Larry Wilpin!" the bad man gasped.

"I mean Larry Wilpin—the red-headed yap who just held up the stage coach from Snarling Gulch."

The bad men examined Julius with concern.

"Lad," Gory Oliver said compassionately, "are ya shore ya ain't had a leetle touch o' th' sun? Ya must be dreamin'. They ain't no stage coach runnin' out of Snarlin' Gulch—ain't been one for goin' on thutty years."

"I say there is!" Yost panted. "The bridge over Snarling Creek washed out last night, and the motor bus couldn't come through, so a party of us chartered the old stage coach to make the trip to Rattlesnake Junction, and—and—"

"Go on, lad, go on," Karl the Killer urged him. "We're bearin' with ya!"

Julius sputtered for a moment. "And—and this red-headed roughneck held us up and stole my girl. He was to take one of us as a hostage for just an hour, so he could make his getaway. And the hour was up long ago. He's taking her for—for himself. For God's sake will you let me go?"

"Now, lad," Gory Oliver said soothingly, "they ain't anythin' t' be gained by goin' off half-cocked. Ca'm yourself, boy, and let us have some o' th' pa'tic'lars. Someway or another, yore story don't jibe. Red Wilpin jest got through tellin' us that the gal was his gal, and when he said it that leetle gal's eyes lit up jest like she was a-hearin' sweet music a-playin'."

"You mean to say," Julius roared, "you've seen them and talked to them?"

"Ayah, nothin' else, son."

"Let me go!"

"No, son, we jest cain't. As I was a-sayin', when Red Wilpin says she was his gal, her face got all rosy, and she give him a smile that was jest as sweet as a mother's kiss, and her eyes—they jest glowed, didn't they, Karl?"

"Ayah, they jest glowed."

"And when she says thar's a feller follerin' us down th' trail and I says: 'Well, miss, whut shall me an' Karl do if we find him?' Whut did she say, Karl? I'm too soft-hearted t' tell th' pore lad. You tell him."

"Why, son," Karl the Killer obliged, "she says: 'I don't keer whut ya do t' th' dirty, stinkin' dawg—th' yaller cur,' she says. 'Hangin',' she says, 'is too good fer th' likes o' him,' she says, 'and if ya meet him,' she says, 'ya c'n pump him full o' lead,' she says. Didn't she, Gory?"

"Ayah, them was her exact words. She says, 'ya'll be conferrin' a favor on me,' she says, 'by wipin' him offen th' face o' th' earth,' she says. 'I love this red-headed boy,' she says—"

"That's a lie!" Julius shrieked. "She didn't say that. She—"

"Jest fer that," Karl the Killer grimly checked him, "I reckon we'll have t' give this yere boy a lesson. Seems like he ain't heard o' th' code o' th' hills, Gory. You stick that gun into him, pardner, while I go through his pockets and—"

"But I haven't so much as a thin dime in my pockets!" Julius wailed. "They took everything I had—that red-headed roughneck and his man Friday! All I have in my pockets is a lone copper cent!"

The bad men exchanged pained glances.

"That shore don't sound like Red Wilpin," Karl the Killer announced finally. "I c'n understand any man wantin' t' kidnap that leetle gal, but—are ya kiddin' us, son? Are ya really sayin' th't Red Wilpin, and old man Pepper actshally held up th' stage and robbed ya?"

"Good God! Of course I mean it! Haven't I been saying so for the last ten minutes?"

"Whut all did Red get away with?"

"Everything we had! He took my watch and chain, and scarf pin, and pocketbook, and there was more than five hundred bucks in it. He took my mother's diamond rings and earrings, and they're worth at the least, fifteen thousand dollars! What did he get away with? Why, the watch he took from

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one of the passengers was worth more than two thousand dollars!"

"Wait a minute, son. Ye mean by th' gross?"

"Don't be ridiculous! The diamonds alone on that watch were worth a thousand dollars. And the judge's bankroll was more than a thousand. And—and—"

"And Red Wilpin got away with all that?" Karl the Killer gasped admiringly.

"Yes—yes—*yes!* And more! The party has offered a reward of seventy-five hundred for the return of only those things I've enumerated." Yost suddenly clicked his teeth and looked excitedly from the face of one bad man to the other.

"Look here," he snapped. "You come with me, help me capture this rascal, and that old fool he has with him and I'll split the reward with you three ways. That's twenty-five hundred bucks apiece. Are you on? That's taking into consideration, of course, that I get the girl."

The smile that had descended upon Karl the Killer's thin cruel lips abruptly faded away.

"Nothin' doin'. Give me th' gal and each of us twenty-five hundred bucks, and we'll do business."

"Wall, how 'bout me?" Gory Oliver put in in a complaining voice. "How about givin' me th' gal?"

"Be yoreself, Gory Oliver! That gal took one look at you and nearly fell out of her saddle in a daid faint. Ya skeered th' livin' daylights outa th' pore leetle thing. No, boys, I'll tak keer o' th' leetle gal. That's final."

"Supposing," Julius suggested, "we toss a coin and see who's to have the girl. That's fair enough, isn't it? The odd man wins."

He extracted a copper penny from his pocket, and the two bad men likewise produced coins.

"Odd man wins th' gal?" Karl the Killer repeated.

"Yep. Odd man wins."

"Toss yore coins, gents."

The coins were tossed and eagerly inspected. Each of the bad men held coins with tails uppermost; Yost's was a head.

"I've won the girl!" he said triumphantly.

"Yes, son, ya've won th' gal by square, honest, and above board methods. And we'll split th' seventy-five hundred three ways, huh?"

"Or, if we feel like it," Gory Oliver suggested amiably, "we'll jest keep th' stuff ourselfs. Whut else has Red got besides whut ya've mentioned?"

The Easterner's eyes suddenly widened. "Good Lord! I almost forgot! They took the U. S. mails."

"Th' U. S. mails!" Karl the Killer and Gory Oliver gasped in unison. They shook their heads with one accord.

"Th' deal's off," Gory Oliver said firmly. "Karl and me don't go monkeyin' with no U. S. mails."

"Besides," his partner put in, "it's too risky anyhow. Ef thar was more of us, and ef it wa'n't fer the U. S. mails, I'd say let's go. Ya shore are onderestimatin' th' man yo're a-trailin', son. Red Wilpin c'n outshoot any ten men in Carcass County. Am I exaggeratin', Gory?"

"Ya shore ain't, pardner. That boy's pappy took him out to shoot Indians f'm a hoss's back when he was skassly old enough t' walk. Karl and me're real smart men when it comes t' quick drawin' and fast and snappy delivery, but, shucks!—we're leetle kiddies compared t' Red Wilpin. No, son. If you're a-goin' after Red Wilpin ya'd better hire ya a posse. That boy's too gifted."

"Will you men join the posse?" Julius eagerly demanded.

"We might—fer a consideration. Where at are ya a-goin' t' git th' posse?"

"Right back there at the stage coach! There are three able-bodied men waiting there."

Karl the Killer looked thoughtful. "Supposin' we do a little dickerin'. My pardner yere and me, we know this country. Our suvvices is wuth hard cash. S'posin' we j'ine up with yore posse, do Gory and me git *all* the reward money? Don't fergit, yo're gittin' th' leetle gal."

"That suits me, gentlemen. Shall we start?"

The two bad men exchanged long, pregnant glances. It was not necessary for these strong taciturn souls to exchange words. Glances sufficed. That which en-

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tered the head of one simultaneously entered the head of the other. With one accord they clicked to their horses and the cavalcade started off at a breakneck gallop.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE RATTLESNAKE.

MARGERY CORBIN rode for some time in silence. But this was not the silence of a mind at pease or of a soul basking in contentment. She was seething with rage and helpless fury. She had, until Red Wilpin made that tactless and unnecessary reference to green-eyed girls, been willing to forgive him for being red-headed; she had been willing, nay eager, to be friendly with him—to be a comrade and a good pal—in a very platonic sense, of course. Now she would never, never forgive him for that brutal blow to her pride.

And as if he were deliberately cherishing the intention of humiliating and infuriating her, when their conversation was ended by her passionate "I hate you!"—he dropped back and cheerfully began to discuss with Friday Pepper the one topic that was calculated to offend her the most.

"It's a-goin' to be one of the grandest parties those hardshells in Yumpa ever seen pulled off," the red-haired bandit said gayly. "Friday, this party of ours is goin' thunderin' down in history."

"Ya reckon we'll squander a heap o' money, Red?" the old man said with a silly chuckle.

"I reckon we'll squander money just as if it was water, Friday. Ain't we got an unlimited supply? And ain't these jewels worth a young fortune? I'll say they are!"

"Whut time does yore Jerginson watch say it is, Red?"

"Listen, Friday!" The young man touched the watch. Promptly it tinkled. Thrice it tinkled.

"Just three o'clock. I sure would hate to hock this watch, Friday. But there ain't anything else I've got a sentimental attachment to. Say! How about the mailsack? How much do you bet there is in the mailsack, Friday?"

"Five thousand?"

"Easy! Ain't it got the payroll of the Merry Wives o' Windsor mine in it? And look at the crew they got! Shall we stop along here and count it?"

Friday shook his head. "I sort of hate t' touch that mailsack, Red, until th' last thing. Thar's somethin' sort of sacred about that U. S. mails. Let's leave it until th' last."

"All right. I feel that way myself. We'll save the mailsack for our nest egg. What're you goin' to start on, Friday—roulette, keno, faro, chuckaluck or poker?"

The old man smiled dreamily. "I reckon I'll jest sort of mosey around and drink it all in at fust, then I'll jest pick and choose."

"Well, I reckon I'll start right in on chuckaluck. That's a real swift game, Friday."

"Shore is. Look yere, Red. Whut in Sam Hill are we a-goin' to do with th' gal?"

"Aw, hire a room for her in the Grand Palace Hotel and leave here there while we go out and paint the town."

"Think she'll be safe thar?"

"Why not? If she can pull a trigger and shoot the bottom out of a coffe pot at one hundred yards by accident, what won't she be able to hit when she begins aimin' at good live targets!"

"Are you having a good time?" Miss Corbin called back coldly.

"Oh, my gracious, ma'am," Friday gasped, "was you eavesdroppin'? We shore are sorry—ain't we, Red?"

"We apologize," Red supplemented guiltily. "I plumb forgot all about your bein' there."

"Oh, I think you're brutal!" she cried. "Dragging me to this vile place and—and marooning me in a hotel while you go out and paint the town! You know very well I'll be frightened to death. How can you be so cruel?"

"Well, ma'am Friday unsympathetically suggested, "ya can change yore mind any time ya wish to, and go on back t' th' stage coach where yore friends are."

"How can I?" she wailed. "You know those two vicious men are between me and the stage coach. And that degenerate

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Easterner: Think what would happen to me if I fell into either of their clutches! You'd be glad if I did—you mean old man!"

"No, ma'am, that ain't so," Friday argued stubbornly. "I shore would hate t' see a sweet, innocent leetle gal like you fall into th' clutches of any of them rascals."

Suddenly, Miss Corbin dropped her face into her two hands and softly wept. The two men eyed her with alarm.

Presently she lifted her little head. "Every one is against me! It's as if I had committed some unspeakable crime! Oh, what have I done to be treated so cruelly by every one? I—I'm tossed about the world as if I were a rubber ball. Oh, isn't there any justice! The world has turned against me!"

"Listen, Margie," Larry Wilpin said uncomfortably, "we ain't turned against you. We like you fine. What are you gettin' so hysterical about?"

"You don't seem to realize how a girl with a sensitive nature like mine can suffer. You—you're so callous!"

"But Margie," he said tenderly, "ain't we aimin' to protect you with the last shell in our guns and the last wallop in our four fists?"

"Aren't you going to leave me in a hotel room in a wicked, wild, dangerous community while you go off and get disgustingly intoxicated and gamble all night long?"

"Sure we are, Margie, but we *have* to do it. You don't seem to appreciate how it is. You don't know how it is to be penned up year after year—"

"Oh, don't I! I've been penned up all my life!"

"Yes, Margie, but not on an ungrateful farm that wouldn't grow a blade of anything—not even if you kissed every seed before you planted it in the ground. You've got your freedom, haven't you? You're gettin' just one brand new thrill right after another, ain't you?

"I don't see what you're kickin' about. I've rescued you away from that vile old woman and that vicious son of hers and a good long spell in the calabozo for a charge of attempted murder. What more can I do? You're as free as a lark—but I ain't.

"I'm goin' to have my freedom, too, Margie, and freedom for me is bustin' loose in Hell's Delight, maybe havin' a few rounds o' drinks, maybe havin' a good interestin' fight or so with some stranger I don't like the looks of, and gamblin' away some of this hard-earned money. I ain't no child, Margie. I'm a red-blooded man, Margie, and I crave some action afore somebody plugs me proper. You trust me, Margie. I'll see to it that nobody hurts or harms you."

"But you're so callous. I—I should think you'd be ashamed of yourselves—two hulking men going off to drink and fight and gamble and leaving a poor little thing like me all alone in a dangerous, wicked town. Back in New York I know ten men—splendid fellows—any of whom would gladly break an engagement for the privilege of taking me to dinner or the theater or somewhere to dance."

"Well, this ain't New York we're headin' for, Margie. It's Yumpa."

"You don't like me!"

"Pussonally, Margie, I like you excellent. But I've just got a deep-seated, long-grained distrust for green-eyed girls. That's all."

"If you only realized how you're humiliating me—the great sacrifice I'm making going off into the mountains with two strange men! My—my reputation is ruined!"

"Yes, Margie, so is mine. Even poor old Friday here ain't immune to the clatterin' tongues that're goin' to start up when everybody learns that we went off into the mountains with a strange girl from the East."

"Oh!" she wailed.

"I'm sorry, Margie, but what I don't know about women would fill a stack of books higher than yonder mountain. But what do we care, Margie, when you come right down to the essentials? We're three outlaws, ain't we? Until we're caught we're a-goin' to lead a life just jammed with thrills—and ain't that what you were hankerin' for?"

"I'm thirsty," she said faintly, "and tired—so tired—of it all!"

"There's a spring down the trail a little

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ways, Margie, and you can get a drink there."

The two men followed her in subdued silence.

"What do you make of it, Friday?" Red whispered.

The ancient mountaineer shook his hoary head. "Women is jest an eternal mystery t' me, Red, I pass."

"But what's got into the kid?"

"Do ya reckon, Red," the other said perplexedly, "she wants ya t' make love t' her?"

The red-haired highwayman snorted. "Oh, Friday, act natural. That girl would fall into a screamin' faint if I so much as said the word *love* out loud. It's all new to her, and I guess she's a little rattled." He raised his voice. "Margie, here we are. I'll hold your hoss. Ya see that faint trail leadin' t'ward that pile o' black rocks yonder? You'll find a good spring a bubblin' up in there. Friday and I'll wait here for you. We've got to watch this trail close, you know."

"I'll hurry," she said wearily, and slipped down from her horse. She followed the faint path through low scrub and, a little more than a hundred feet from the road, found the spring, which bubbled up, crystal clear in a nest of moss-grown black rocks.

She knelt down and put her parched lips into the icy black water. When she lifted her head and dashed the clinging drops of water from her lips, she suddenly went limp, for not four feet from her, coiled on a dry flat rock, was a green and yellow snake, its graceful, beautiful head lifted from the coils of its thick body, its eyes shining upon her like gems.

Too terrified to utter a sound, she could only stare at the snake. She had never seen a diamondback rattler before, but from the sharp demarcations on its thick coils, she identified it.

She impulsively placed her hand over her mouth and gnawed at it. And at this sudden gesture the snake's eyes seemed to fill with a venomous gleam, and its body seemed to stiffen. Chilling waves of terror swept over her. She tried to move her knees, with the intention of backing slowly away, but they would not move. She opened her mouth to scream for help, but still no sound would come from it. Every muscle in her body seemed to be gripped by a freezing paralysis.

She groaned, and at that alien sound the rattler drew in its coils more tightly. She had heard that rattlesnakes strike always for the throat, and her terrified imagination pictured long, curving white fangs buried in her white throat.

The snake was watching her with unrelenting venom. With every slight swaying of her body its graceful head likewise swayed. If her shoulders swayed backward, its head swayed forward. Its long gleaming body seemed suddenly to be in tune with the impulses racing in hers. Beyond question, that beautiful shining coil would untangle and come leaping at her with the precision of an arrow if she moved or cried out.

And now that she was faced by death in this horrible form, she did not want to die. A few minutes earlier, she would have welcomed death—a death no less swift and violent than this. But now life was sweet and worth the living.

Suddenly a brittle crackling filled the chill mountain air. It seemed to rise up in waves of insistent sound from all about her—like the buzzing of a locust, only immeasurably louder. Then she realized it was the snake. That metallic, world-filling buzzing was the signal that preceded its attack. In an instant it would fling itself at her—bury its white fangs in her throat.

She could not move. She could not utter a sound.

The slender, beautiful head rose a little higher; it seemed to be vibrating. The coils moved. It was preparing for the spring. In another moment—

A scream of horror surged from the girl.

Before her staring eyes the graceful, beautiful head of the snake had suddenly vanished from its body. Only the slightly bloody stump of its neck remained, and this was instantly lost in a tangle of writhing coils.

Then Red Wilpin came sprinting down the path, his smoking revolver still in his hand. He was pale with anxiety.

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"Are you all right, Margie?" he cried, and thrust the gun into its holster.

She staggered to her feet and with a little cry stumbled into his arms.

"Hold me tight!" she breathed. "I'm so afraid."

The encircling arms asserted a more pronounced pressure in obedience with her wish.

She clung to him, shaking.

"You shot it from your horse!" she gasped.

"Yes, yes. Stop shivering, honey. It's all right. Stop worryin'. I told you I'd look out for you."

"It had me trapped," she whimpered, clinging to him and dropping her head as if for comfort, upon his broad chest. "I was paralyzed."

He patted her back soothingly.

"Just trust me, honey, just trust me. Larry will take care of you."

"You—you do like me, don't you?"

"I sure do! I like you fine!"

"And you—you think I'm—pretty?"

"Sure I do! You're the prettiest girl in the world!"

"You're not angry with me any more?" she asked with a little sigh of content.

"Why! Of coss I ain't! Who could be angry with a sweet little thing like you?"

She lifted dewy eyes and a radiant smile.

"Then you *won't* go out and fight and drink and gamble the night away and—and leave me alone, will you, Larry?"

"Margie," he answered, pushing her gently but firmly away, "I can't help myself. Circumstances over which I have no control are a makin' me *have* to go out and fight and drink and gamble the night away. What did you say, Margie?"

"I said," she bitterly replied, "that I wondered why red-haired men were such selfish, horrid brutes!"

CHAPTER XV.

ENTENTE CORDIALE.

WHEN Julius and his two new friends, trailed by the string of saddled but riderless horses, came briskly down the slope to where the yellow stage coach was standing, Spavin Yampdon, Judge Oglethorpe, Marshal Sniffin and Mrs. Yost were huddled together in a little group with expressions ranging from anxiety to acute alarm.

"Did you get my Jerginson?" the judge called as Julius came within shouting range.

"No, judge," the young man panted, "it wasn't wise. None of us realized how serious this is. He has stolen Miss Corbin—taken her off into the hills with him!"

His mother sniffed. "Stolen her, indeed! Didn't I prove to you all that her going was what the cheap politicians call a frame-up? It was prearranged. I am almost tempted to say I told you so."

Julius dismounted. "No, mother, this man Wilpin is much more dangerous than any of us supposed. He got that poor girl into his clutches by a crooked trick, and it is up to us to save her. Think of that poor, innocent child in that fellow's power!"

"She's a scheming harridan!" Mrs. Yost snapped.

"I love her," Julius said simply, "and she must be rescued from that scoundrel before it is too late. But it is a dangerous undertaking. I met these two men on the trail and they convinced me that it would be extremely inadvisable to follow Red Wilpin single handed. He is the quickest man on the draw and the deadliest shot in Carcass County. We held a conference and agreed that it would be wise to return here, form a posse, and go after them in earnest."

"A very sound idea," the judge agreed. "There is safety in numbers."

"Yes, sir! Now we're a gettin' somewheres," the stage driver chimed in. "Who are these friends o' yourn, Mr. Yost? Holy mackerel!" he gasped. "Can I be a seein' true? Why! These two men are th' two wust bad men north, east, south or west of the Texas Panhandle!"

"Who are they?" Mrs. Yost bleated.

"It's Gory Oliver and Karl th' Killer, ma'am!"

"Outlaws?"

"Oh, ma'am, if they was only nothin' wuss than outlaws! Them two 're guilty of more red handed murders th'n any pair o' men in th' entire Southwest. They're hoss thieves. They're cattle rustlers. They're

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claim jumpers. They're th' kind o' men ya don't see as much in th' new West as ya did in th' old—men with so many crimes behind 'em they don't dast go into a town where law and order reigns. Used t' belong to Kit Snacker's outfit down on th' Rio Grande afore th' Rangers wiped 'em out. Been rovin' these yere hills since them days. Oh, we shore are in for trouble now!"

The horse thieves dismounted. Karl the Killer, stroking his long, tangled brown beard, advanced toward the group with a threatening leer. Gory Oliver, his beady little eyes full of suspicion, swaggered behind him, his hand resting on the butt of one of his guns.

Karl the Killer swept off his bleached and dingy black sombrero with a flourish.

"At yore suvvice, folks!" he roared.

Mrs. Yost yelped. The mocking bow which Karl the Killer made had given her a complete view of the top of his bald head, and it was not surprising that she had been moved to cry out. The bald dome of Karl the Killer was an intricate pattern of old knife scars and bullet scars and patches of greenish-blue—old gunpowder marks. Most prominent were the bullet scars—pale streaks across his scalp, where he had been "creased" countless times.

The outlaw replaced his sombrero, deposited his large brown hands on his hips, and looked at her, then glanced inquiringly at Julius.

"Who's this dame?" he wanted to know.

"She's—she's my mother," the young man stammered.

"Ayah? Wall, I had a mother m'self, once. All right, folks, let's git down t' business. This young feller yere's a been a tellin' me and me pal th't Red Wilpin stuck ya up and made his get-away with all yore valuables and a purty young gal. Whut we got t' do, as I figger it, is t' strike quick and fast. Does that meet with yore approval?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives.

"Then let's hold a conference," the Killer briskly suggested.

"A capital idea," Judge Oglethorpe coincided. "Now we're getting somewhere. The motion has been made by this gentleman that we hold a conference. I second the motion. All those in favor of holding a conference will signify in the usual manner."

There was a chorus of "Aye, aye!"

"The motion has been carried," the judge said briskly, "that we hold a conference. I think we may now proceed with the business of the meeting. This gentleman has the floor."

Karl the Killer bowed slightly. "I will be as brief and t' th' p'int as possible, folks. I know Red Wilpin, I used t' know his pappy, and, afore him, many's th' game o' cribbage and backgammon I played with his granddaddy by th' light o' th' old log fire with th' wind a howlin' and th' Apaches a gittin' ready t' attack at any minnit. Might go s' fur as to state that I know th' Wilpin family well.

"'S a family o' quick-drawin', straight-shootin', hard-fightin' he-men and womanly women. That's why I heartily recommend to ya, as I recommended t' th' young feller yere, th't we don't go a chasin' Red Wilpin with no small foss. 'S only one way to hunt down Red Wilpin, and old man Friday—and that's with a posse!"

He looked at the circle of eager faces about him.

"I agree with you," Marshal Sniffin put in vigorously. "I know you two men well, as it happens. You're both wanted men, with prices on your heads, and I am United States Marshal Jeffery P. Sniffin. It is my duty to arrest you men, but in the face of this emergency and until it is over, I will not molest you."

Karl the Killer grasped the marshal's hand and pressed it fervently.

"I call that white of ya, marshal," he said in a voice somewhat choked with emotion. "Gory, don't ya call that white o' th' marshal t' declare an armistice?"

Tears misted the eyes of Gory Oliver. "I shore do."

"I can safely say," the marshal went on, "that two men could not have been better selected for our purpose. They know these mountains as we know the streets of our respective home communities. They are fearless men."

"I think it is in order," Judge Oglethorpe

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put in, " to swear in the posse for the man-hunt."

Marshal Sniffin nodded. " Attention, every one!" he cried. " I hereby swear in each and every one of you as a deputy United States marshal until such time as this emergency is decisively terminated by the capture or the extinction of one Lawrence Wilpin, one Friday Pepper, and one Margery Corbin, the aforementioned Lawrence Wilpin, Friday Pepper and Margery Corbin having deliberately and wantonly defied and broken the laws of these sovereign United States, and by so doing becoming outlaws and renegades punishable by death."

" Are we t' shoot any one of 'em on sight, marshal?" Spavin Yampdon put in meekly.

" Precisely! They are outlaws and they must be dealt with as such."

" But how about th' leetle gal?"

" We can draw no distinctions," the marshal said firmly. " She becomes, by neglecting to return to us, a material witness. As such she must be classed as an outlaw. Judge, is my interpretation of the law applying to such conduct correct?"

" It would be upheld by any court in the land," Judge Oglethorpe said decisively.

" Very well," the marshal said. " Do each and every one of you solemnly swear to give your allegiance to this posse until such time as these three outlaws are exterminated or brought before the bar of justice? Raise your right hands. Now repeat after me: 'We so solemnly swear.' "

When the posse had been sworn in Karl the Killer raised his hairy hand again.

" Look yere, whut 're we a goin' t' do with the old gal?"

Mrs. Yost drew herself up haughtily. " I beg your pardon!" she said freezingly.

" Wall," he said indignantly, " what are we a goin' t' do with ya? We cain't leave ya yere t' be torn limb from limb by th' mountains cats and th' wolves, can we?"

" Are there mountain lions and wolves here?" she bleated.

" Ma'am, where at did ya think ya were, if I may politely ask? This ain't th' corner of Forty-Second Street and Broadway, ma'am. This is Carcass County, prob'bly th' most untamed section of th' hull Southwest. I've saw wolves and mountain cats so thick on this yere road at night that it looked like a circus parade."

" Don't ya reckon," Spavin Yampdon put in, " that ef we shut her up good and tight in th' coach, she'd be all right? We c'n leave a gun with her, cain't we?"

" I won't be left here alone!" Mrs. Yost wailed.

" Wall, ma'am," said Karl the Killer, " we've got t' think of th' greatest good fer th' greatest number, and we cain't be bothered with an old lady in no man-hunt."

" I'm not an old lady!" Mrs. Yost snapped. " And I'm in perfect physical condition."

" But, Mrs. Yost," Judge Oglethorpe said gently, " you were saying only a little while ago that you should be in a sanitarium."

" I said nothing of the kind!" Mrs. Yost cried. " You must have misunderstood me. I am going to accompany you. I will not stay here to be eaten alive by mountain lions and wolves."

Karl the Killer shook his head.

" Ya don't seem t' realize, ma'am, that this is *war*. We ain't goin' off into them hills on no picnic. It's rough goin' and we're goin' t' travel fast. Whut if ya are et alive by mountain lions and wolves? I sh'd think ya'd be glad, ma'am, t' sacrifice yoreself fer sech a worthy cause."

" Few women are given the chance to die so nobly," Judge Oglethorpe added persuasively.

" Think, mother," Julius put in. " You'd be a heroine—a real heroine—just like those Christian martyrs they dipped in oil and set on fire! Mother, are you going to fail in this test?"

" Yes, Mrs. Yost," Marshal Sniffin pleaded, " think what this decision of yours may mean to children yet unborn! Think what that trio of desperadoes may accomplish if we do not strike surely and swiftly!"

" Mother—say you'll stay!"

" I will not stay," Mrs. Yost angrily replied. " Because—you are going to need me!" she added triumphantly. " I value the lives of all of you too highly to permit you to go off on this dangerous mission without a woman to comfort you and nurse

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you. Before this expedition has finished with its work, many of you will undoubtedly be mortally wounded.

"Then you will need the tender mercies of a good woman—a woman who is gentle and understanding, to hold your hand in your last mortal agonies before you pass into the Great Beyond, a woman with tender touch to attempt to stem the tide as your life blood flows away!"

Her audience exchanged uneasy glances.

"A woman," Mrs. Yost added tremulously, "to fold your hands upon your breast, to close your eyes in the eternal sleep, and to take little messages to your loved ones at home."

Karl the Killer dashed a few tears from his eyes.

"Yes, ma'am, I reckon thar's somethin' in whut ya say. Thar's apt to be few, if any of us, who survive this man-hunt, and a good, tender woman 'll come in handy to tend our wounds, as ya say. Ef I sh'd pass out from this yere mountain road t' th' long, long trail, it w'd shore ease me in my last mortal agonies t' have a woman breathe a leetle prayer over my corpse when it's cold and stiff. But can ya ride a hoss, ma'am?"

"Can I ride a horse!" Mrs. Yost cried. "I have hunted to hounds in Germany, France, Belgium, England, Ireland and Italy. I have won seventeen steeplechase cups. I have broken and tamed horses that were notorious man-killers. I have ridden a donkey all over Egypt. I have ridden camels in the Sudan and in China and Mongolia. I have ridden and hunted elephants in India and Burma and Siam. My zebra saddle mare was the sensation of Paris winter before last!"

Karl the Killer looked at her incredulously, then gazed at her son, as if for confirmation.

"It's true," Julius said modestly. "Mother can ride anything. We're on our way now—or were before that red-headed yap broke up our plans—to Pasco, where mother planned to enter the ladies' bulldogging contest."

"But—but, ma'am," the Killer stammered, "are ya shore ya c'n stand roughin' it?"

"Be yourself!" she snapped. "I've roughed it in the wilds of Canada, Africa, Alaska, South America, *et cetera*. These mountains of yours will be child's play. My riding habit is in one of my suit cases. If you men will kindly turn your backs I will go into the coach and change. Do you wish to swear me in, marshal, as the Florence Nightingale of this posse?"

The six men cheered. Mrs. Yost raised her right hand and was sworn. And while she was changing to a riding jacket, breeches and boots, the marshal removed one of his bags from beneath the canvas flap at the rear of the stage coach and passed out glittering new automatic pistols. He broke out ammunition and gave each man his share. Then the stolen horses in the string of Karl the Killer and Gory Oliver were examined. Each man selected a mount. Cinches were tightened, stirrup straps adjusted.

When Mrs. Yost emerged from the coach, buckling about her waist a cartridge belt and a pearl-handled pistol, the posse was ready. Since the last controversial point had been settled, an air almost sinister was to be noticed in their bearing. It was the grimness of men going into battle—of men who were prepared to sacrifice their lives, if need be, in defense of an ideal.

With a rattling of steel and leather, a trampling of hoofs, they started at full gallop up the trail.

The man-hunt was on!

CHAPTER XVI.

THE AVALANCHE.

"I THOUGHT ya said ya could cook!" Friday Pepper snarled.

"Why—why," Margery Corbin stammered, "is—is something wrong? Isn't everything all right?"

She was on her knees before a small fire that had been kindled in a nest of small rocks; and pots, pans and provisions were scattered on the ground about her. There was a charcoal smudge on her left cheek near her drooping mouth; and in her large dark eyes glowed the light of defeat. She was an appealing, pathetic figure as she kneeled there.

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The old mountaineer glared at her. "Nothin' ain't right," he complained in bitter tones. "These yere beans're scorched, and—look at this yere biscuit!"

He thrust toward her the half of a biscuit. Its center was a soggy, doughy lump. She looked from the heart of the half baked biscuit to Friday's glaring old eyes.

"Ya said ya could cook!" he shrilled. "And look at this yere biscuit! Oh! ya cain't fool me! I know yore game!"

"My game?" she whispered.

"Yes!" he snapped. "Yore game! Ya want t' git rid o' me, that's yore game. Ya want me t' git acute indigestion, so ya c'n git me outa yore way!"

"Oh, Mr. Pepper, how utterly ridiculous!" the girl cried. "And it isn't true that I cannot cook. I can cook. I'm an excellent cook, and I think I've done pretty well, considering that this is the first meal I've ever cooked over an open fire. Don't you think I've done pretty well for a beginner, Larry?" she demanded, looking imploringly at Red Wilpin.

"Well, Margie," he said judiciously, "these biscuits are pretty terrible, and the beans are burned, and the coffee ain't fit to drink. Aside from that I guess you've done pretty well."

"But I'm only an inexperienced girl!" she cried.

"Ef I had my way," Friday grumbled, "I'd have every dumbed gal in America fossed t' jine th' Camp Fire Gals, so's she could be ready fer jest sech an emergency as this."

Margery Corbin looked at him defiantly, through the tears that had started into her eyes.

"Can't you think of anything that isn't unkind and cruel to say about me?"

"No, ma'am, I cain't."

The girl buried her face in her hands and softly wept. Presently she lifted her head.

"No one has a kind word for me," she whimpered. "I've tried and tried, but at every turn I'm misunderstood. Oh, what have I ever done that everybody should be against me so! Is it because I'm a girl? Is it because I'm penniless? Why should I be persecuted wherever I turn? Why am I blamed for things that are not my fault?"

"Ain't them burned beans yore fault?" Friday said sternly.

"Whut in Sam Hill," Larry Wilpin burst out, "is the meanin' of that?"

He sprang to his feet and shaded his eyes against the glare of the afternoon sun. They had stopped for a late luncheon on the narrow path beside a roaring mountain stream. Above them on either side, walls of rock rose sheerly to dizzy heights. Where the walls ended, thousands of feet above them, was only a narrow strip of sky. At this spot the gorge was straight, so straight that they could see for miles in the direction from which they had come.

Friday had likewise leaped to his feet and was staring.

"Hossmen!" he snapped. "Must be nigh into a dozen of 'em, Red!"

"Look like a posse to you, Friday?"

"It shore does, Red. Do you reckon it's that bunch from th' coach?"

As if in answer, a bullet hummed over their heads, struck a jutting rock behind them, whined angrily and rebounded into the roaring stream. Chips of rock rained down upon them.

"Margie!" Larry snapped. "Shove that stuff into the sack. We've got to be hittin' the trail and hittin' it fast. They're after us. And I surely thought we'd have till mornin!'"

While Friday was rounding up their horses, Red helped Margie pack the utensils. Bullets whined overhead or splashed into the stream. A column of dust arose from the hoofs of the oncoming posse.

The three outlaws leaped upon their horses just when it seemed that the posse would sweep down and annihilate them. Around the bend they galloped. Another long, straight vista of the gorge opened before them.

At first the outlaws gained, but inch by inch the gap closed. Bullets were striking closer and closer to the fugitives.

"Shall we start firing at them?" Margie cried to Red Wilpin.

He shook his head vigorously. "Got to conserve our ammunition."

Suddenly Friday Pepper's sombrero leaped from his head and sailed out over the stream, riddled.

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"Margie! Friday!" the red-haired leader shouted. "See that patch o' bowlders yonder? Make fer it! Drop down behind it! From that vantage point we could hold an army at bay fer a week!"

They gained the cluster of bowlders, dismounted and dropped from sight. Their mountain bred horses, trained to such contingencies, promptly kneeled down and rolled over, so that they too would be protected by the bowlders.

Red Wilpin seized the girl by the shoulders. Margery Corbin huddled close to him and her upturned face was radiant with courage.

"I'm not afraid," she cried. "Is it—good-by? Oh, I think it's perfectly glorious to die this way, Larry! To die fighting! It's the way we all should die! Oh, I'm so—"

"Look!" he stopped her in a harsh voice. "My God—look!"

"Good Gawd!" Friday Pepper moaned.

"Oh!" the girl cried. "It can't be!"

The ground upon which they kneeled was rumbling, but not with the pounding of horses' hoofs. The posse had stopped perhaps three hundred yards away. Now they were retreating in disorder, and all were looking upward at the sheer mountain wall which rose thousands of feet above them.

The wall was bulging outward. A bowlder as large as a two-car garage came bounding down to splash mightily into the roaring stream. It was followed by others large and small. The face of the wall was sliding—sliding! Perhaps some gigantic forces, some stresses and strains within the earth, had chanced to exert their pressure at this moment; perhaps some stray bullet or the vibrations aroused by the hammering of so many hoofs had caused some cleavage in the wall face to widen. Now tons and thousands of tons of loosened rock were tumbling into the gorge.

Down they came with an earth-shaking thunder. And instantly the light from the distant sky filtering into the narrow gorge was extinguished. The air became dark with dust, and the black powder of grinding rocks. Thunderclap followed thunderclap as bowlders plunged down to the bottom.

Margery Corbin huddled closer into Larry Wilpin's embrace and shivered. If death were to overtake her now, she preferred to spend her last moments in the arms of this man whom she had learned to admire. Then she realized with a little thrill of happiness that he was holding her close to protect her from the deluge of rocks in case the landslide crept this way. Above the uproar he shouted:

"Did you see them when it fell?"

"They seemed to be directly under it!" she cried. "They must be buried under tons of rock! Oh, how perfectly terrible!"

The thundering ceased. Presently the air took on the grayness of dawn as the heavy dust settled. Soon the grayness became yellow, then objects became visible. And in time the blue stripe of sky reappeared thousands of feet above them. And as far as they could see down the path which they had followed was a mass of torn and shattered rock.

The gorge was choked. The avalanche had filled the stream, and created a dam which towered above them hundreds of feet. And the stream was rising. If they did not hurry they would be as rats caught in a trap.

Friday, white with a thick layer of dust, came crawling over. His eyes were dazed.

"Red," he gasped. "Where—where's th' posse?"

"Wiped out!"

"D'ya mean—they're all daid?"

Red Wilpin nodded. "Yes—dead, all of them." He flung out his hand. "Yonder's their grave, Friday."

Margery Corbin suddenly seized Red Wilpin's shoulders and shook him.

"Larry! Larry!" she cried. "Don't you realize what it means? It means we're free, dear! We're free!"

CHAPTER XVII.

YUMPA.

THEY hastened toward the end of the gorge, which was but a half mile distant. They were awed by the catastrophe which had befallen the posse, yet they could not but feel relieved and a

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little glad. As if by a Divine act, their enemies had been obliterated.

"It's a mighty strange thing, Friday," Red Wilpin commented some minutes later, as they emerged from the gorge into a flat wooded valley, "but this is the second time to-day Margie has saved our fool lives for us."

His ancient retainer snorted. "How in Sam Hill do ya figger that out, Red? She didn't start that landslide, did she?"

"Nope, but do you recollect when we both wanted to stop and have lunch about a quarter mile back she insisted we was to go on just a little farther? And finally we let her have her way? Well, what would have happened if we hadn't gone on a quarter mile farther? We'd have been trapped in that slide. We sure would. Margie, you saved our lives."

The girl said nothing. She was too happy for speech. By a strange twist of fate—by the release of some thousands of tons of age-old rock—her problems had been wiped away. The threat of an impending prison sentence for attempted murder was removed.

"We're free!" she cried again. "We're free, Larry!"

Friday Pepper nodded sagely. "The leetle gal's right," he agreed. "We ain't outlaws. We ain't bandits. We ain't highwaymen. We're jest three travelers. 'Cause why? 'Cause nobody knows. And they ain't any of us a goin' t' tell. Aside from us, they ain't a soul livin' now who knows th' stage has been held up. Everyone of 'em's accounted fer. Even that old lady. I seen her jest afore the rocks started a fallin'. And I seen Gory Oliver and Karl the Killer, and that fresh smart aleck, Julius."

"Let's not speak harshly of the dead," the girl said gently.

"Ma'am, I ain't a-speakin' harshly; I'm only a-tellin' th' truth."

"That's right," Red Wilpin agreed. "To me, Friday and Margie, what happened back there in the gorge was not only an act of Providence for us, but an act of punishment for them. There's not a one of them didn't deserved being wiped out by that avalanche. Look at the lives Karl the Killer and Gory Oliver have led—spreadin' terror for years and years all through the Southwest.

"And what better fate did that judge and that marshal deserve, for letting that old woman blacken your character the way she did! And I reckon that young dude got just what was coming to him, too, for persecuting you the way he did. And did Spavin Yampdon stand by you, Margie, when the pack turned on you and said you were a wicked woman?"

"He certainly did not! He was one of the pack!"

"And there you are. Call it what you will, but I call it somethin' a whole lot grander than just accident. Each and every one of them got just what they deserved. As for us—well, what have we ever done? Why should we be punished? The only wrong thing we ever did was to hold up that stage coach."

"And jest think," Friday chuckled, "all this money and all these diamonds are ours by right of inheritance. Ain't we the nearest heirs? Wasn't we the nearest when that rock slid down on 'em? Boy, we ain't outlaws. We ain't outcasts. We c'n go anywheres we please—onless this gal blabs."

Margery Corbin tossed back her curly bobbed hair and laughed.

"You suspicious old man! You'll never trust me, will you?"

"No, ma'am, not after them biscuits."

"Well, I don't care," she caroled. "I'm free. I can say with the Count of Monte Cristo, 'The world is mine!'"

Her companions regarded Margery curiously.

She laughed happily, flung out her arms and inhaled deeply of the sweet, cool mountain air.

"Just to think! Less than three or four hours ago I was virtually a prisoner in the clutches of that suspicious, selfish old woman and forced to listen to the insulting remarks of her son! I was as helpless as an animal in a cage. I was just an ignorant, soft, innocent girl. How the past few hours have changed me! I'm a woman now, Larry."

"Yeah?"

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"When I think of the marvelous, glorious adventures I've been through in such a short time it makes me almost want to cry for the poor girls in the cities who will never, never have such opportunities. Just think, Larry! In these few hours I've been accused of attempted murder, I've become the pal of highwaymen and outlaws, I've narrowly missed being killed by a rattlesnake, I've been shot at with real bullets, and I've been through an avalanche!

"Oh, how glorious life is! If this excitement could only go on and on forever! And here—here I am at last in these heavenly mountains that I've always longed for! Isn't it simply wonderful, Larry?"

Red Wilpin looked at her tousled hair, her shining eyes, her flushed cheeks, her radiant smile, wonderingly.

"You sure are one romantic little cuss," he said.

"But we are pals, aren't we?"

"Sure we are, kid."

"And—and you don't suspect me any more, do you?" she said sweetly.

"Of coss not."

"How about them beans?" Friday growled.

"Oh, stop your everlastin' bellyachin', Friday," the young man groaned. "Give the kid a fightin' chance."

His old retainer sniffed. "I knew it. Yo're a-changin' that fool mind of yourn agin. Yo're a-fallin' in love."

"I ain't fallin' in love. The woman ain't been born I'd fall in love with."

"That's whut ya say. Wall, whut're ya a-goin' t' do in the end? Whut're ya a-goin' t' do when we git through with this leetle picnic and git ready t' settle down again and live respectable? Whut're ya a-goin' t' do with her then?"

"I ain't figgered it out."

"Of coss ya ain't figgered it out. The figgerin' ain't in yore hands. Wall, I'll tell ya, m' son.

"It's whut always happens. Ya'll git used t' seein' her around. Ya'll git used to her leetle ways. Ya'll git so ya cain't stand t' miss th' way she bubbles over and laughs, and th' way her hair comes down t' a funny leetle p'int on th' nape of her neck, and th' way her eyes light up when ya say somethin' clever. And when she's gone ya'll mourn her as if somebody was daid."

"Wait a minute, Friday," Margie put in crisply, "maybe I'll have something to say about that."

"Whut in Sam Hill can ya say? Yo're a-bein' swept along in th' same current. Ya'll be so used t' th' rough ways he treats ya, ya'll jest pine away without him."

"Oh, don't be so silly."

"Silly!" the old man shrilled. "I could bust out a-cryin' at th' way you two young folks are a-dallyin' with dynamite. Fust yo're sore at him, then he's sore at you. Fust you save his fool life, and then he saves yourn. Fust you wrangle, and then, fer no excuse or other, ya go a-creepin' into each other's arms and croon like a coupla doves! Silly, am I?"

Margie's cheeks were aflame, and she could not meet his accusative, triumphant glance.

"Silly, am I? Wall, whut're people a-goin' t' say about this leetle expedition? Whut difference does it make if I'm along? I suppose th' two of ya think people 're jest goin' t' set back and say, 'Oh, how natural!' and 'Oh, wa'n't it a lark!' when they hear th't a beautiful young gal and a handsome young buck went and got theirselves lost in th' mountains fer a few days. Ya shore have got a pair of innocent minds ef ya think that."

Red Wilpin groaned. "My Gawd, Friday, I'm beginnin' t' wish we'd never brought you along. Every time we begin to feel good and happy and natural, you trot out a passel of poisonous ideas. Gosh darn it, if you're goin' t' feel so sensitive and if Margie's goin' back into the world with a blasted reputation, I'll pull in at th' next minister's and marry the girl."

"Will you?" Margie snapped. "Well, let me tell you something, Larry Wilpin. I wouldn't marry a red-headed man if he was the last human being on earth. And the man who marries me is going to want me so badly he won't be able to eat or sleep. No, thanks! No red heads for little Margie. I want peace and I want—love."

"Well," Red Wilpin took her up angrily, "who in Sam Hill said anything about love? I ain't sayin' I don't like you, but

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as for love— Great gosh! I sure am goin' to be color blind when I fall in love with any green-eyed girl."

"I'd like to know," Margie said indignantly, "where you borrowed this majestic hatred for girls with green eyes—and I've told you a dozen times my eyes aren't green. They're ultramarine. What did any green-eyed girl ever do to you, anyway?"

"Never you mind."

"Did a green-eyed girl ever bite you?"

"That ain't funny."

"Well, you are. You're a perfect scream."

"And thar ya go!" Friday broke in triumphantly. "A-scrappin' agin! And jest about two minnits f'm now ya'll find some excuse to go a-creepin' and a-croonin' into each other's arms. Great crawlin' snakes, why don't ya admit ya're in love, you two?"

Margie laughed softly. "What you know about women, Friday, would pass through the eye of a needle without having to draw its skirts aside!"

"Jest because I don't go round a-braggin' about whut I know about wimmen—" he sputtered.

"I'll bet you were a devil in your youth, Friday."

"Ya're jest tryin' t' git me off'n my subject, young lady. Wall, ya cain't. As I was a-sayin'—"

"Hey!" Red Wilpin interrupted him. "Yonder's Yumpa!"

They had reached the end of the valley. Below them, in a gigantic cup formed by gently sloping hills, lay a cluster of wooden buildings from which pale-blue smoke arose to be lost in the flawless azure of the sky.

Yumpa!

CHAPTER XVIII.

GUARDING THE MAILS.

DUSK was drawing its veil over the notorious mountain village when the trio reached its outskirts. Lights twinkled menacingly in clapboard structures.

Since her first glimpse of the village, Margie was oppressed with a sense of foreboding. The buildings were unpainted and dilapidated. Raucous shouts and yells appeared to be issuing from all of them. The single street of the town was lined with saddle horses.

It was a glimpse of the West that existed perhaps thirty, forty years ago, but Miss Corbin was neither grateful nor glad to have the pages of history flipped backward to this bloody old chapter for her benefit.

She was frightened. A pungent odor, composed of burned gunpowder and cheap liquor, floated down the street and it became more pronounced, more vigorous, as they approached two larger structures which fronted upon each other from opposite sides of the dirt street.

Horses neighed and whinnied and stamped. Two ponies were fighting, a pinto and a mustang, rearing and striking at each other with vicious hoofs, snapping at each other with flashing white teeth.

But no one heeded them. Crowds streamed along both sides of the street—hilarious crowds. Yet the spirit of these men could not be said to be a carnival spirit; it contained a note too sinister, too menacing.

She jumped and nearly fell from her saddle as a burst of shots occurred in one of the buildings they passed. Yet no one on the streets, or her companions, took notice of it.

"Who—who are these creatures?" she stammered.

Red Wilpin, riding beside her in the purple dusk, chuckled softly.

"They're desert rats, hoss thieves, cattle rustlers, claim jumpers, outlaws—just bad men generally, Margie. Say, ain't it great? Don't it give you a real sure-enough thrill?"

"I'm frightened," she said.

"Nothin' t' be scared of, honey. I'm a goin' to get you a nice, quiet room in the hotel yere, and if anybody gets frisky you just tell them you're Red Wilpin's girl. Savvy? And if that don't make no impression, you send somebody for me. I'll be over in Hell's Delight."

He reined in to speak to Friday. "Friday, old pal, ain't this grand? Whut color

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are we a goin' to paint the town, pardner?"

"Red!" the old man yelped happily. He jerked out his revolver, aimed it at the heavens, and pulled the trigger six times rapidly.

Margie jumped at the explosions, and from the sides of the streets arose hilarious cheers.

Near by occurred a crashing and splintering of broken glass. She glanced in that direction in time to see a large man flying through a window, head and shoulders first, carrying with him the entire frame. He fell in a snarling heap on the ground, and a loud shrill voice cried:

"Now, will ya stay out,"

She shuddered.

"Here we are, Margie!" Red Wilpin cried jovially. "Get down, and I'll tie your hoss. This is the Grand Palace Hotel, Marge. Across the way is Hell's Delight."

She glanced first at one structure, then the other. The Grand Palace Hotel was a tipsy clapboard structure of five stories, three of which were false. Lights burned wearily behind several windows. There was a spooky air about the place, a sense of evil.

But the impression she gained in her glance across the road was otherwise. Hell's Delight blazed with illumination. A jazz tune blared from its open doors. The shouts and laughter of men and women poured from its windows. Here sorrow was drenched and hope renewed; here men fought and drank and gambled and made forceful love to painted creatures in spangled dresses.

This was obviously the center of Yumpa, the rotten core of a rotten town, where the scum and the offscouring of the deserts, the mines, and the ranches foregathered to carouse. There was viciousness in the throbbing air—a threat of knives and steel-jacketed lead in the very music banging and thrumming from the doorway.

Yumpa!

"Oh, please, please, let's go on into the clean, wholesome mountains!" Margery Corbin begged.

The red-haired bandit laughed harshly.

"This is life!" he cried. "After spendin' all my life on a farm that won't grow nothin' but false hopes, this suits me right down to the ground. Yip-ee!"

They had dismounted. Red Wilpin growled:

"Ya got the mail sack, Friday?"

An answering mutter: "Ayah. Rolled up yere under my arm. Whut 're we a goin' t' do with it, pal?"

"Margie 'll look after it."

"I won't!"

"Aw, don't be a spoil-sport, kid! You ain't goin' t' welch on us, are you, honey?"

"Don't call me honey! I hate you! Oh—oh, why did you ever bring me here? I'm afraid. Don't go away and leave me alone in this dreadful place! Oh, please, Larry!"

She shrank against him as a man, cursing under his breath, brushed past her.

"I'll find him," the man had muttered. "I'll find him and I'll stick eight inches of cold steel into his stummick!"

"Who was that?" she gasped.

"Oh, just a desert rat. Come in and write your name in the book, Margie. Oh, my, what a night this is a goin' to be! Here—where's that mail sack, Friday?"

He pushed open the door of the Grand Palace Hotel, and they entered the dingy room, feebly lighted by flickering oil lamps in dirty glass chimneys. A number of red-faced men, with bandannas at their necks and heavy guns at their hips, were lounging or sleeping in chairs against the walls.

A room clerk with drooping black mustaches leered at her as she stumbled up to the desk. But he abandoned the leer when he glanced from her to the stern face of Red Wilpin.

"This girl is under my protection, Dick," Red Wilpin said. "You savvy that?"

"Shore! Shore!"

"She wants a room with a strong lock, and a window that can't be climbed into from outside, and no trapdoor in the ceiling. Savvy? This is my girl, and anybody who so much as looks slantwise at her has got Red Wilpin to deal with. Savvy? S'posin' you just pass that rumor around. Write your name in the book, Margie."

With a trembling hand Margery Corbin

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wrote her name in the ledger. Then she looked anxiously about her. For a moment she did not see Red Wilpin. He had dropped back and was conversing with Friday Pepper.

One of the men in the chairs along the walls awoke at this juncture and saw her. He arose and came heavily toward her. He wore a black beard and his lips in the midst of it were red and shiny. His eyes gleamed as he neared the girl.

"Wall," he said boisterously, "ef my leetle sweetheart ain't showed up just in time!"

"Who—who are you?" she wailed.

"Me? Why, I'm Rollin' Roscoe. I jest rolls and rolls. Fust yere, then yonder. My goodness, whut a sweet, purty leetle gal ya are! And ain't them clothes cute!"

A large brown claw reached for her shoulder, and she shrank back against the desk until she could retreat no farther. The brown claw descended with a viselike grip, and the dingy room seemed to swim. He was drawing her toward him. He was going to kiss her. The gloating eyes and slimy lips came nearer and nearer.

"Larry!" she cried faintly.

Abruptly she was released. Rolling Roscoe was stretched out on the floor and Red Wilpin stood over him with clenched fists.

"If you lay your hand on my girl again," he snapped, "you're a goin' t' get worse than that, you dirty claim jumper! This girl is my girl—savvy?"

Rolling Roscoe sat up and wiped blood from his mouth with the back of one hand. "Sufferin' cats, Red," he whined, "how'd I know she was yore gal? Why don't ya put a label on her?"

"There's a label on her now," Red Wilpin informed the tensely quiet and expectant room, "and it says 'Red Wilpin's girl—hands off!' You get me, you yellow dogs? Anybody who's thirstin' fer a fight, speak up now!"

There was no response.

Red Wilpin swaggered to the desk. "Ya got a room fixed up for her?"

"Shore, Red, shore—room 10. Quiet, nice room. Southern exposure. Got a real brass bed in it."

"Gimme the key!" Red snapped. "C'mon, Friday. C'mon, Margie."

They ascended a flight of rickety stairs, and found room 10 at the end of the hall. It was a box of a room, pine floored, pine ceiled. The door was equipped with an iron bolt one inch square.

Red Wilpin tossed the mail sack on the bed.

Margie," he cried in a ringing voice, "I'm leavin' the United States mails with you, and I want you to guard 'em the way a wild cat guards its young. There ain't anything in Yumpa half as sacred as that mail sack, Margie. If anybody comes along and tries to get it away from you, fight for it, Margie, tooth and nail—fight for it with the last drop o' blood in your body. Don't let anybody get it except across your dead body."

"You know I'm simply terrified!" she wailed.

Red Wilpin nodded approvingly.

"That's the correct attitude to take, Marge. It 'll keep you awake. It 'll mean you won't have the bag sneaked away when you aren't lookin'. Keep on bein' terrified till I get back. I prob'ly won't be gone longer 'n eight or ten hours. I'm leavin' a message with th' man at th' desk. It says if you ain't here perfectly safe and sound and happy when I call for you, he's a goin' to answer to me. If you get scairt, just send for me over to Hell's Delight. I'll be there till dawn. By that time I reckon I'll have some excitement figgered out for to-morrow. We'll start bright and early.

"Now, you guard that mail sack. Whatever you do, don't open it. You've got your gun and you've got plenty cartridges. Don't hesitate t' shoot anybody but me and Friday. Good-by, and don't forget to lock that bolt."

They stepped out into the hall. The door slammed. The bolt shot home. And before they started down the hall they heard the sudden shrieking of bedsprings as the girl cast herself down, then the sound of sobbing.

"I don't figger her at all," Red Wilpin grumbled as they started downstairs. "She is all the time a-yellin' for thrills and more

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thrills. Wouldn't you s'pose Yumpa would make her just purr?"

"I don't claim to know nothin' about wimmen," Friday replied. "Now let's go across the street and raise some hell."

CHAPTER XIX.

TEMPEST.

IT was quite dark when they emerged from the Grand Palace Hotel—dark and somehow ominous with a threat of impending storm. The sky had swiftly become overcast, lightning flicked in greasy waves along the crests of the encompassing mountains. Thunder growled distantly like the cursing of an approaching destructive giant.

In the street men were fighting and singing.

Red Wilpin and Friday Pepper entered Hell's Delight. They pushed their way through a mass of men to the bar and each downed a drink of a scorching poison, masquerading in a bottle labeled Scotch. The insistent, persuasive voice of the keno dealer penetrated the hubbub. Nearer at hand a roulette croupier—a thin man with murderous cold eyes and a complexion of pipe clay—whined his invitation: "Try yore luck on th' wheel, boys!"

A dance-hall girl with blood-red lips, watery eyes, and artificially gold hair seized Red Wilpin by the arm and brazenly invited him to dance.

"I ain't dancin' to-night, ma'am," he said courteously, removing the plucking hand. "I'm a-lookin' for Doc Saunders, th' saxophone player. Will you kindly tell me where to find him, ma'am?"

The dance hall girl laughed and swayed tipsily.

"Doc Saunders?" she shrilled. "Ye mean the one who could imitate all th' animals?"

"That's the one, ma'am!"

"Oh, he's gorn."

"Gone?"

"Yeah! He got into a row with Big Sam Snarky a long while back, and Big Sam knifed him. C'm'on, hon', le's dance."

"Leave me alone," Red Wilpin said angrily and pushed her aside.

"Did you hear that?" he demanded of Friday. He was pale, so pale that his ancient retainer became alarmed. "Doc Saunder's is dead! Here I went and stuck up that dog-goned stage coach to come over here to take some saxophone lessons from Doc Saunders—and he's dead. Aw, hell."

"Le's have another drink."

"Aw, to hell with that rot-gut. I wanna fight."

"Come on, Red, be sensible. It's too early t' fight."

"Uh-huh. I've done changed my mind. Gonna try my luck on the wheel. Say, you keep an eye peeled for Big Sam Snarky. If you see him you tell him I got some business with him—important—savvy?"

"Be sensible, Red."

"I ain't here to be sensible. I'm here to raise hell. Git outa my way, you big bum!"

This was addressed to a tall, broad-shouldered man with a spikey black mustache and hostile black eyes.

He wheeled on Red Wilpin, revolver half removed from holster, but the cold muzzle of Red Wilpin's weapon was already jammed against his ribs.

"If you're a-hankerin' for a fight," the young man said in a quiet voice, "say it snappy."

The black-mustached man thrust his gun back into its holster and grinned.

"Quit yore funnin', Red. I ain't cravin' t' make the acquaintance of no ondertakers yet a while. In town long?"

"As long as the roll lasts."

"Wall, jest plunk down a leetle on that wheel f'm time to time, son; it won't last long. Have a drink?"

"Ain't drinkin'."

A half hour later, consistently playing the red, Red Wilpin had parted with the last of the contents of Julius Yost's wallet. Friday had been having similar success with Judge Oglethorpe's recent bankroll. Their play had been punctuated by occasional visits to the bar.

"Friday," the young man said suddenly, "we gotta guard that U. S. mail. You run out and take a look at the hotel once in a while."

"Shore!"

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Friday withdrew and presently returned with the news that the hotel was still standing.

"Thar's one hell-buster of a storm brewin'. It's lightnin' fit to kill."

"Let her brew. Let her lightnin'. Doc Saunders is dead. I don't care what happens. I wish somebody would start somethin'. I shore do crave some action. Hey, white face, gimme another hundred dollars' wuth o' them chips. What? You give me any of your backwash and I'll blow your crooked heart out!"

The croupier looked thoughtfully at Red Wilpin's fists.

"I think this here wheel is fixed," the young man said, to taunt him.

"Wall, ya didn't think so any quicker thin I did, old timer," the croupier hastily assured him.

"Friday!"

"Whut ya want now?"

"How's the U. S. mails?"

"I'll take another look, Red."

In Friday's absence, a thin, pale-faced youth approached Red Wilpin.

"Say, Mr. Wilpin," he said huskily, "yore gal wants ya."

"Who the hell are you?" Red snapped. "I ain't got no gal."

"She's over in the hotel, Mr. Wilpin."

"Somebody's stringin' you, kid. I ain't got no gal nowhere."

"Wall, she says she's yore gal, and she wants ya should come over on th' jump. Goshamighty, if I had a gal as purty as she is, I'd sure come a hoppin', no kiddin'."

"Whut's this gal's name?"

"Name's Miss Corbin."

Red Wilpin wheeled on him and seized his shoulders.

"Say! What've you been sayin' lately?"

"I been sayin' yore gal wants ya!"

"Did she tell you to fetch me?"

"Shore, she did!"

"Well, why don't you say so in the fust place?"

"I did! I says—"

Friday came racing in. "Red," he panted, "fer Gawd's sake come outa yere quick!"

"What's up? What's happened to Margie?"

"I dunno. I don't keer. Come on, you fool!"

Red Wilpin struck the man standing nearest a fair, clean clip on the jaw. The man sank to the floor. He lashed out at the next, and sent this one sprawling backward over a table occupied by five earnest poker players. These at once sprang to their feet, and Red Wilpin struck at first one, then another.

Some one lifted a chair. It hissed past his left temple. He hit the wielder soundly in the mouth.

A man sprang at him with a six-inch bowie knife. Red kicked him in the shins, dove between the legs of a tall, lean man who was balancing a bottle preparatory to throwing; came up on the other side, butted a fat man in the stomach, stepped on his face, and clipped a gold prospector in the jaw.

Hell's Delight was now in an uproar. Tables were upsetting; chair backs were being wrenched apart to serve as weapons. To add to the general confusion and excitement, Red snatched his gun from its holster and with three nicely placed shots extinguished as many kerosene lamps.

Dance hall girls were screaming and crowding the exits. Strong men were wondering profanely what it was all about. Red answered one with a blow in the solar plexus, another with a straight-arm jab in the jaw.

Friday Pepper, in the rear, was fighting off pursuers. Back to back they fought their way to the street amid flying bottles, tossing furniture and flashing knives.

They reached the door and left Hell's Delight in their wake, a howling pandemonium. A six-shooter cracked viciously six times. A woman screamed.

The street, strangely, was almost deserted. Friday Pepper dragged him into the center of it and pointed waveringly toward the hills from which they had come.

"Look!" he screamed.

"I don't see nothin'!"

"Wait fer th' lightnin'. Look, Red, look!"

A clap of thunder shook the air, the ground, the buildings. Green lightning licked the outline of a towering thunder-

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head, which appeared to be piling down upon Yumpa from the direction toward which Friday Pepper was agonizedly pointing.

Suddenly, above the rumbling of thunder, the shouts and yells in Hell's Delight, came the pounding of horses' hoofs.

Then lightning blazed in forks and streaming layers. Its ghastly light illumined the oncoming horsemen. As if they were racing out of the very heart of the tempest, they came! Behind them, the garish green curtain of the advancing storm, seeming to wave them onward; before them, alone in the middle of Yumpa's only street —Red Wilpin and Friday Pepper!

Down the empty street abreast galloped the lost posse!—Gory Oliver, Karl the Killer, Mrs. Yost, Marshal Sniffin, Judge Oglethorpe, Spavin Yampdon and Julius Yost!

The air and the ground shook as another blast of thunder crashed overhead. Some one was plucking at Red Wilpin's sleeve. It was Margery Corbin!"

"What are you doin' here?" he gasped.

"I saw them from my window—minutes ago!"

"Where's the mailsack?"

"I gave it to Friday!"

He stared about him. Only a moment ago Friday had been standing beside him. He was now nowhere to be seen.

"Where'd he go?"

"I don't know!" she wailed. "He saw me coming and he ran toward me, took the mailsack—and vanished!"

"Didn't he say anything?"

"Yes, he said: 'We must protect the U. S. mails no matter what happens!'"

Then it was that a savage cry, hardly human, rang out:

"Throw up your hands!"

CHAPTER XX.

PRISONERS!

YUMPA shook with another blast of thunder. And in the greasy green flare of the lightning that accompanied it, and the white effulgence streaming from the windows and doorway of Hell's Delight, onlookers saw that Red Wilpin, in obedience with the harsh command, had elevated his hands high into the air and that the pretty, slim, bobbed-haired girl beside him had flung her arms around him and was clinging tight.

The posse, under command of Marshal Sniffin, had meanwhile closed about the two in a ring that bristled with the gleaming black muzzles of automatic pistols.

"Disarm that man!" the marshal cried.

Julius Yost, wearing a smile of cynical amusement upon his thin lips, dismounted. With a contemptuous gesture he flicked the revolver from the holster on Red Wilpin's right hip and tossed it to the ground.

"Disarm the girl!" Mrs. Yost called warningly. "The little harridan would stop at nothing—nothing."

The little harridan, her soft cheek pressed tight against the bristly, rough jaw of Red Wilpin, whispered tenderly:

"Oh, my dear, my dear, I thought they had been buried under tons of rock. This is the end. Oh, it seems so unfair, so cruel. Why! It was only this morning that we met. And after all that we've been through —oh, they can't part us now!"

"They can't, eh?" Julius Yost sneered. "I gave you your chance this morning, Margie—a life of ease and luxury, and you threw it down. You jeered at me. You called me an ugly thing. And you thought you'd escape. Hah! You grabbed at the first chance that came along—this red-headed roughneck. And now—do you know what's going to happen to him? He'll swing!"

Snuggling close to the breast of the man she loved, Margery Corbin stared at him in terror.

A grin flitted over the lips of Red Wilpin. And the eyes he turned upon Julius Yost were gun muzzles.

"They may get me, buddy," he said quietly. "But if they don't—and you can jot this down in your little red notebook where you keep the names and addresses of your chorus girl friends—I'm goin' to give you some lessons in etiquette that you ain't never goin' to forget."

"But—but we're trapped!" the girl wailed. "Look, dear — there are pistols everywhere. Everywhere I look I see pistols!"

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"And the first false move your red-headed sweetie makes," Julius said with a chuckle, "every one of those pistols is going to speak its little piece. So you're going to teach me some lessons in etiquette, are you—you mountain rat? All I have to say is that you'd better start the classwork mighty soon.

Red Wilpin dropped his mouth to the girl's nearest shell-pink ear.

"Honey," he whispered, so low that Julius could not hear, "whatever happens, don't lose your nerve."

"But he says they're going to hang you, darling!"

"Ayah, he says lots o' things. This is all kind of new and strange to you, Margie, but it's purty old stuff to your red-headed sweetie. You stick close by me. Keep your wits handy. My neck ain't in the noose yet, and this Yumpa gang 'd never stand to see a pretty little thing like you swing from no cottonwood. Keep a stiff upper lip, lamb, and—"

"Is this petting party to last all night?" Mrs. Yost cried impatiently. "While you men are hesitating, that young rascal may be plotting some diabolical plan with that shameless girl. I move that we hang him without delay, and that we hang the girl from a limb of the same tree!"

"Shore!" Spavin Yampdon cried hoarsely and with an evil attempt at humor. "They've been a waitin' t' hang together. Whut I say is, let 'em!"

The crowd of desert rats, horse thieves, cattle rustlers, claim jumpers, and dance hall girls that had poured out from Hell's Delight until Yumpa's main and only street was jammed, roared, but whether it was their wish to see Margery Corbin hang beside the red-haired stage robber, or to spare her, it was impossible to glean.

"Yes!" Marshal Sniffin interjected when the roaring had ceased. "Let's hang them both!"

Again the crowd roared; but this time the intent of that roaring was clear—terribly, terribly clear.

"Atta baby!" a loud-voiced miner made himself heard. "Let's have a double hangin'."

"Shore! That's th' ticket! A double hangin'!" scores of voices upheld him. There were, indeed, no dissenting votes.

The dance hall girl whom Red Wilpin had rebuffed so urgently only a few minutes before in Hell's Delight, thrust her painted, leering face close to Margery Corbin's.

"So yo're th' gal he turned me down fer, are ya? You ——, with yore meek ways and yore scairt eyes and yore leetle white face!" She snapped her powdered fingers under the Eastern girl's nose, and a faint puff of talcum floated off on the stiff mountain breeze. "Ya'd better cling tight to him while ya can, ya shiverin' weaklin', ya! 'Cause why? I'll tell ya, ya white-faced city rat. Ya see that cottonwood tree down yonder? Afore an hour's gone, yore lover's a goin' t' be a swingin' f'm that! Now cry, ya white-faced baby!"

"I'm not crying!" Margery Corbin replied in a steady, resolute clear voice. "I'm not afraid. Nor is he. We can face death without flinching. We are not afraid to die—are we, dear?"

Red Wilpin dropped his hands, regardless of the circle of steel surrounding him, and enfolded the girl more tightly to his breast.

"No," he said quietly, turning to the dance hall girl, "and if you and the likes of you—you painted she-devil—had the guts of a rabbit and the soul of a snake, you'd stand by us and fight fer us."

The dance hall girl, snapping her powdered fingers under his nose, withdrew with a burst of mocking laughter.

Margie nestled closer to Red Wilpin's breast. He was scanning with tragic eagerness the faces of the pack as it closed about them. He groaned.

"Oh, honey, I jest cain't believe that Friday has gone and left us thisaway. It ain't like him. Ever since I was a kid he's stood by me, jest as he stood by my pappy before me. This was his chance to show whether he was a pal or jest a yaller dog, and—and now it's too late."

"Too late?" she echoed.

"What chance have we now," he said bitterly, "with all this gang against us? Don't ya see what we're up against, honey? It's jest you and me against the whole

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damned world—two outlaws caught and trapped with the goods on them. It sure looks like we're done for, little girl. And just when things was beginnin' to look sort of bright and hopeful for us, too.

"You see what the posse's a doin' now? They're gettin' ropes ready, that's what they're doing'. And they ain't goin' t' give us no chance to explain. A crowd in the mood they're in don't want explanations. What they want is action—and thrills."

"Oh, Larry," she panted, "hold me closer—closer! Don't let them take me away from you. If I must die, Oh, please let me die in your brave arms!"

The pressure of his arms increased.

"And hear the gang from Hell's Delight a mutterin', lamb!"

"It's the thunder of the storm, dear!"

"No, hon', it's that gang—the scum and the offscourin' of the Southwest. They come to Yumpa fer thrills and excitement, the way we came here this evenin'. And there's nothin' they like better than a hangin'. Oh, we're goin' to swing, girl, we're goin' to swing!" His voice ended on that somber note.

Margery Corbin suddenly lifted a pale, determined little face to his. Her dark eyes were shining, her lips were parted faintly upon what was almost a smile.

"Before they take us, dear," she breathed, "kiss me!"

"Yes," he agreed sadly, "we might jest as well have our good-by kiss now. Purty soon we're goin' to part forever, lamb."

"To meet again, dear!"

"Oh, I ain't so sure about the life hereafter," he said gloomily. "I'm only sure of one thing, girl, and that is—"

"Ah, kiss me, dear. Your dear lips—"

He dropped his lips upon hers. A thrill, unlike any sensation he had ever before experienced, shot through Red Wilpin. Her lips reminded him of scented silk, of little flowers blooming in the spring on mountain sides, of soft and mellow music as Doc Saunders had rendered "What 'll I Do?" on his saxophone.

He clasped her more tightly and prolonged what had been going to be, as far as he was concerned, the sort of kiss that a brother bestows upon a sister.

Under the sweet impact of the novel sensation he slightly reeled. And far overhead the air rocked and convulsed under a renewed onslaught of thunder.

He pushed her feebly away.

"Listen, lamb," he gasped, "great gosh, what have I been a talkin' about? Did my own voice say that this here gang was a goin' to swing you and me from yonder cottonwood? Did I say that you and me was goin' to be parted—now?"

"Yes," she quavered, "yes, dear. Those were almost your very words."

"Well," he said in a clear and ringing voice, "I've changed that fool mind of mine. I sure have."

"Have you a plan?" she cried.

"Hon', I don't need no plan. All I need is to set my mind and it gets done!"

"You—you can free us?"

"I sure can and will, kid. Just you place your bets on the Red as the croupier says. That's me!"

"Is it?" the sneering voice of Julius Yost fell into their startled ears. "Well, folks," he shouted above the tumult of voices, "are we ready to start the proceedings?"

"Shore!" the crowd from Hell's Delight cried as if with one monstrous voice. "We want th' gal t' swing fust!"

CHAPTER XXI.

JUDGE LYNCH.

AT that sinister cry, Margery Corbin sprang again into the protective shelter of the red-haired bandit's arms. But she looked up courageously into his face.

"Oh, it's too late to hope, dearest. We've had our little day. It's a shame that love came to us—too late—but we have loved and we can face death without fear. And I—I prefer it to be this way, Larry. If—if they were to hang you first, I am afraid I would show them what a coward I am. After all, I'm only a woman, and if I saw them killing, strangling the one thing in the world that I love, I—I know I would die letting them see what a coward I am."

"Wait a minute," Red Wilpin said gently, and raised a hand to command silence.

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The light streaming from the open doorway of Hell's Delight fell upon his grim, fearless countenance.

"Listen!" he shouted. "As this hangin' bee is goin' to give you one and all a little choice entertainment, it ain't but fair that you should grant the wishes of a man that's condemned to die. This little gal I hold here in my arms ain't used to these strange, rough doin's. She's plumb scairt out of her wits. All I ask and all she asks is that you end her sufferin's first. Will you grant that one last wish of a man who's a goin' to his doom?"

The roar of the mob silenced him. It was evident that his plea had fallen upon fertile ground in the hearts of a few, but it was likewise evident that the coarser element—if it could be said that there were degrees of coarseness in the crowd that had been disgorged from Hell's Delight—wished cruelly to see the unfortunate young girl suffer to the last.

It was her anguish that they looked forward to most; this dainty morsel of femininity they must see rent with terror at her gruesome fate. And it was Belle, the dance hall girl, who put this feeling into gripping words.

"Naw!" she shouted hoarsely. "Let th' red head swing fust. Let that gal, with her white face and her quakin' knees, see how it looks when a man wiggles and squirms and kicks out fer a breath of air when th' knot tightens on his gullet! Let her see fer herself how his arms flap and flail and how his chest comes near to bustin' as he tries and tries and tries to gulp down a leetle air that won't never, never pass that knot against his throat!

"Let her see his kickin' and writhin' git more and more violent ontil it reaches that stage when ya can skassly foller his movements with th' nekkid eye, and then git slower and slower as his face and hands gets bluer and bluer ontil finally us boys and gals sends a passel o' lead into his stiffenin' corpse! Let her see him suffer, whut I mean, ladies and gents! I'm sayin', if ya do it my way, we're a goin' t' see somethin' choice and interestin' when it comes t' her turn."

A roar of tumultuous approval greeted Belle's suggestion. She was clapped on the back. Another dance hall girl hugged her gleefully and men spoke to her who had heretofore ignored her. It was Belle's high moment.

Margery Corbin was softly weeping upon Red Wilpin's chest. Through his flannel shirt he could feel her hot tears.

"Well, I reckon it's the end, lamb," he said quietly. "And there ain't no law to stop 'em. No mayor, no sheriff, no constable. Oh, my Gawd, why did Friday have to go and turn yaller in our hour of need? Mebbe he's protectin' the U. S. mails. And, of coss, they have got to be protected. But why couldn't he figger out some way to protect them and protect us at the same time?"

"And why, why," the girl sobbed, "is this dreadful form of punishment to be visited upon me? What would my poor dear dead mother and father think if they knew that their little girl—their little Peaches—was going to be hanged just to satisfy the morbid curiosity of horse thieves, cattle rustlers, claim jumpers and—and scarlet women?

"Oh, why does the world treat me so cruelly? What have I ever done? I have never spoken an unkind word to a man, woman or child. I have never lifted my hand in anger against a dumb beast. I have gone to church, taught in a Sunday school class and said my prayers regularly."

"Well, hon', you'd better be sayin' your leetle prayers right now, 'cause there ain't a goin' to be much more time left. And put in a good word or two fer me. Mebbe my life ain't been blameless, but I ain't no goat masqueradin' around in lamb's wool, if I do say so. And mebbe I have spoken an unkind word or so, and I reckon I've lifted my hand in anger against more dumb beasts than I can count on my fingers and toes—and sometimes my hands contained a club or a blacksnake whip.

"But jest the same, hon', the sins of these here folks who ain't a goin' to die are a whole lot more scarlet than mine. I ain't never shot down or stabbed a fellow creature without bein' real provoked fust. So recommend me in yore prayers, hon', and put my best side forward."

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"Say!" Belle, the dance hall girl shrilled. "Whut is this, a pettin' party or a lynchin' bee?"

"Ain't that rope near fixed?" Spavin Yampdon shouted.

Red Wilpin gathered the girl a little closer. Suddenly she felt his lean muscular body stiffen. He gave her a convulsive hug that left her well nigh breathless.

"What's happened?" she gasped.

"Honey," he panted, "I've jest gave birth to an idee. It mayn't work, but I sure am a goin' to fling it to these wolves." Once more he raised his right hand to command silence, and when the hubbub had subsided he cried:

"Hey, judge! Oh, judge! Judge Oglethorpe!"

"Well, what is it?" the unfriendly voice of Judge Oglethorpe gave answer.

"Judge," the young man proceeded in the breathless hush that followed, "you say you've practiced law; you say you've served the State as a prosecuting attorney; you say you've honored and distinguished the bench in the appellate division. Is that true, judge, or ain't it?"

"True?" the judge said curtly. "Of course, it's true. What of it?"

"I want to know, judge, if you consider it fair and just to send a man to his death without a fair hearin'."

"In this case," Judge Oglethorpe snapped, "I do!"

"But, judge, you can't stand there and let them hang me on circumstantial evidence."

"Circumstantial evidence!" the judge snorted. "Five people—each one a reliable witness—saw you commit a ghastly crime. We don't require additional evidence. You're going to be hanged, and I for one intend to see that the job is done properly. Yes, and the hanging of your fair accomplice!"

"But what has she done, judge?"

"She is a material witness!"

"Well, how do you know she is, judge? How do you know I didn't take her into these here hills with me by force?"

"I have witnesses to prove that you did not—that she accompanied you of her own free will."

"Who are the witnesses, judge?"

"These two stanch men of the great, open spaces — Gory Oliver and Karl the Killer! By their own testimony—"

"But, look here, judge," the young man interrupted plaintively, "you know as well as I do that their testimony won't hold in any court of law in the land. Who are they? I can furnish you a whole box car load of witnesses t' prove that Gory Oliver and Karl the Killer are hoss thieves, cattle rustlers, claim jumpers and out-and-out murderers.

"I can get you witnesses right out of this crowd to prove that them two killed a poor old widow woman and stole five dollars off her corpse. And I can prove that they are escaped convicts from the State penitentiary, and I can prove—"

"Aw, let's cut out th' palaverin'," Belle the dancehall girl snarled. "The evenin's goin' and thar's a storm a blowin' up."

And as if to underscore her statement a peal of thunder shook the heavens and the ground on which they stood.

But Judge Oglethorpe appeared suddenly irresolute. And Red Wilpin saw that he had gained an advantage.

"And how do you know, judge, that all yore witnesses ain't criminals? Spavin Yampdon don't dast to leave this State. And I'll gamble that Julius Yost is wanted in more'n one place. And how shore are ya, onless ya put 'em on th' witness stand in the regulation way, that Marshal Sniffin and Mrs. Yost are reliable witnesses? How shore are you that I ain't innocent myself?"

"Where do you get that stuff?" the judge roared. "The material evidence is secreted upon your person. My watch. My wallet. Mrs. Yost's jewelry. The marshal's. Search him, men!"

But a search through the red-haired bandit's pockets revealed nothing but a Boy Scout knife, a bunch of keys and several dozen cartridges.

"That old man has them!" the judge cried.

"Well, how sure are you?"

"Where is he?"

"I dunno."

"Gorn!" Belle cried. "He's a pastin' th' ball, jedge!"

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The crowd muttered.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" Red Wilpin demanded. "You ain't got any material evidence against me; and it's purty doubtful if th' word of any of these witnesses is wuth a damn. Don't me and this gal deserve some justice? Ain't you convinced that we do, judge?"

Judge Oglethorpe wavered. The posse, irked by the delay of what had promised to be thrilling fun, protested.

"Ya know, jedge," Spavin Yampdon inserted, "this lad has a repytation fer bein' slick and quick thinkin' Ef ya want my opinion, he's jest stallin' fer time. Ef ya don't hang him now, he'll shore slip out o' yore hands."

"Yes, judge," Mrs. Yost added. "And I put nothing beyond that shameless girl—nothing.

"Even now she is scheming, and if she escapes once more I know that she will not rest content until she has committed upon me some unspeakable, horrible revenge."

"I'd like to wring your nasty old neck!" Margery Corbin said hotly.

Mrs. Yost shrank behind the protective circle of pistol muzzles. "There!" she cried. "You see! She wants to strangle me!"

"Well, judge," the marshal broke in, "it's up to you. We will abide by your decision."

All eyes turned again to the stern, hoary old face of Judge Oglethorpe.

"There is only one thing to do," he said with finality. "This town is a lawless community. There is no court of law. Justice must be meted out according to the form that is followed in all lawless lands.

"The robes of justice are not at hand, the panoply of a civilized tribunal is not available. We must conduct this trial according to the code of the great Southwest.

"And from time immemorial the judge who has presided at all trials in this land of manly men and womanly women has ever been one and the same—a grim, uncompromising figure. Not a man, but a principle—the principle of swift, ruthless justice." In a voice that seemed to partake of some quality of the thundering storm, he finished:

"And his name, ladies and gentlemen, is —*Judge Lynch!*"

CHAPTER XXII.

THE TEMPTER.

WHIMPERING with alarm at these unexpected words, this postponement of a cruel, but accepted fate, Margery Corbin permitted her bandit lover to half lead, half carry her toward the blazing white doorway of Hell's Delight. The crowd, muttering with ill-concealed vexation at the delay, surged after the two lovers into this deserted edifice of sin—this clapboard cathedral of crime. Yumpa, in the course of its black and bloody history, had seen many strange things, but never a scene so strange as this.

The temper of the habitués of Hell's Delight was, as a matter of fact, dangerous. Six pairs of eyes had seen Red Larry Wilpin hold up the stage coach; six pairs of arms had been lifted into the air at his command; five smarting victims had been left to ponder over their plight, when, with the beautiful Margery Corbin as hostage, he had made his getaway. These facts had already been assimilated by the customers of Hell's Delight.

Red Wilpin, on prima facie evidence, was guilty of a crime that had always been punishable in these parts by hanging. To try him in the face of such damning evidence was a waste of time. And the girl ought to be hanged without delay too, by jingo! Wasn't she his gal? Couldn't a blind prairie dog see that? Hadn't they exchanged a kiss in the presence of a hundred witnesses —a kiss so long and intense that, at its conclusion, both had reeled and all but fallen?

"T' hell with tryin' 'em!" a burly prospector roared. "Whut's th' sense of all this yere dilly-dallyin'?"

"That's whut I say!" a one-eyed cattle rustler enthusiastically agreed.

The prospector seized him by the hand. "I left my pal out yonder in th' Smokin' Desert," he hoarsely divulged, "sufferin' from th' bite inflicted by a gila monster—

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dyin' by slow degrees, stranger. I came yere to fetch him whisky t' ease his sufferin's. I promised him t' come straight back. Yere's th' whisky, on my hip!" And he slapped the hip in question.

"Th' only thing whut made me stay yere was th' chance of seein' Red Wilpin and his gal swing from that cottonwood. My pal's a dyin'. Mebbe th' whisky would save him. Now I'm torn and rended with indecision. Shall I stay yere on the chance that they'll hang Red Wilpin and his gal—or shall I hit th' old trail and carry th' whisky t' my pal? Whut shall I do, pardner?"

The one-eyed cattle rustler thwacked him on the nearest shoulder-blade.

"Stay and see th' trial, of coss! You and me'll drink th' whisky, and in th' mornin' we'll go out and give yore old pal a decent buryin'."

"Ya'll promise to go with me?" the prospector said sternly.

"Shore!"

They shook hands. Such was the character of the men before whom Red Wilpin and Margery Corbin were about to go on trial for their lives.

"Jest the same," the prospector growled, "it ain't nothin' but a plumb waste of time."

Belle had overheard this last. "Be yoreself," she said indignantly. "Ain't ya yere t' see some fun? Ain't th' gal and her lad a goin' to swing in th' end? And ain't she a goin' to suffer up to the bitter end? Jest watch her wiggle and squirm, boys. Look at her eyes now. Ain't they jest blank with fright and terror and fear? And look how pale and weak she is! Boys, this is a goin' to be one big night in Hell's Delight!"

What the dance hall girl had said of Margery Corbin was cruelly true. She was not inured to hardships; the day in the mountains had been a trying one physically, and the last half hour had been harrowing. She was delicate, almost fragile, and it did not seem possible that she could keep her chin up and her shoulders back any longer. But the flame of courage was re-awakened in her large dark eyes when Red Wilpin spoke.

"I'm proud of you, Margie. I never knew a gal could be so brave. Keep right on lookin' 'em in the eye, honey. We're goin' t' swing, but nobody can say we died yaller. How's the little ole upper lip?"

"Stiff," she said in a brave little voice.

The voice of Julius Yost sounded slurringly in her ears.

"Well, my dear," he said with his cynically amused smile, "things are beginning to look darker and darker, aren't they?"

"I'm not afraid to die!" she cried.

"Ah, yes, I know, I know, the little martyr going bravely to her doom and all that. But it may not seem quite so pleasant when they place that hard, prickly rope about your soft white throat. Martyrdom is a graceful gesture, my dear, but is kicking and writhing at the end of a rope for a final breath of air so graceful—while a mob of horse thieves and painted women hoot and jeer and laugh? Think, my dear, think!"

She wrung her small white hands.

"Oh, why do you torture me so?" she whimpered. "Aren't you satisfied with what you've done? When your mother called me a shameless little gold digger, and declared that I had been trying to steal your love, why didn't you speak up as a real man would have done and tell her that I had tried and tried and tried to make you keep away from me?"

He only smiled at her.

"And why," she wailed, "when she accused me of attempted murder—of pushing you from the cliff—why didn't you speak then? You know you walked off the cliff of your own accord. If I had not gone with Larry Wilpin when he held up the stage you would have permitted her to put me in prison in Rattlesnake Junction!"

"Are you so sure?" he said gently.

"Wouldn't you?" she gasped.

"It depended entirely upon you, my dear. I had made a friendly little suggestion that you were to meet me in San-Francisco—"

"Oh, you beast!"

"And now," he said, still smiling, "you are going to hang! How sad, how unutterably tragic!"

"You—you cad!"

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"No, my dear, not a beast, not a cad, but your very devoted lover. It is true you did not push me from the cliff, as I permitted my mother and the others to believe. I was in a state of ecstatic delirium following the kiss that I stole. It made me forget the cliff.

"And that kiss, dear heart, unlike any kiss I have ever experienced at the lips of another girl, was a sample on the merits of which I still wish to place a very large order. Now, before it is too late, I will state my proposition once more—and for the last time, my dear. Will you meet me in San Francisco and try—try to learn to love me—a little?"

A wave of color had washed into Margery's face. She plucked at Red Wilpin's sleeve.

"Larry, Larry, have you been listening to him?"

"Yes, Margie. I've heard it all."

"And you—you haven't anything to say?"

"Honey, I'd pound the yeller dawg into a pulp for what he's been a saying to you, only if I lift one hand I'd be riddled quicker than you could say scat. And if I'm gone yore last chance is gone, savvy?"

"But what shall I do, Red?"

"Do Hon'? Well, ain't that largely up to you?"

"You mean—" She stopped and stared at him with wide, alarmed eyes.

"I mean, Margie, this feller here who reminds me of nothin' in th' world but the sort of things that go scuttlin' around when you lift up a slab of stone—Well, girl, I guess I mean that this feller can save yore purty little white throat from the noose—if you want to let him."

"And—and give myself to him?"

"Well, I reckon those would be his terms."

"But I—I don't understand!" she cried.

"I'll endeavor to make it clear to you, dear heart," Julius obliged with his cold, confident smile. "Your bandit lover here is shrewd. He has an uncanny gift of perception. He realizes that whether you hang or whether you go free depends on what kind of character you are given by those who take the witness stand.

"My mother will take the stand and paint your character as she sees it. And you could be hanged, my dear, on your character as my mother sees it. But when I am called to the stand what—ah, what will I tell those wolves?"

"You will tell them the truth or you will be a despicable coward!" she cried.

"But truth," he said cynically, "is such an inexpensive commodity, or so it would seem. Any fool can tell the truth, while wise men occasionally lie to further their own ends. I am not a fool, but I am willing—nay, eager—to let these people know the truth!"

"For a consideration," put in Red Wilpin sourly.

"Yes!" Margie blazed.

He smiled. "Am I so offensive, from your fastidious point of view, Margie?"

"Detestable!" she gasped. "Loathsome! You—you're worse than that rattlesnake that was coiling to strike me this afternoon—"

"But killed in the nick of time by your bandit lover, I presume?" Julius finished ironically.

"Yes! He saved my life and I—I love him!"

"And you are willing to hang with him and for him?"

"Larry," the tortured girl pleaded, "make him stop. Oh, I loathe him so!"

"Honey," Red Wilpin gravely replied, "it ain't in my hands any longer. What this here white-faced lizard says is true. Dependin' on what he says in the witness-stand yo're a-goin' to swing from that cottonwood or you ain't a-goin' to swing from that cottonwood. And what he says on the witness stand depends on what kind of a dicker you can make with him now."

"Larry, Larry," she wailed, "oh, you can't mean that! You can't mean that, after what we've been through together, you'd stand idly by and let me sell myself to him!"

"You might live long enough, little girl, to live down the disgrace of that, but once you're a-danglin' from the bough of a cottonwood tree it's purty hard to retrace yore steps. Death at the end of a rope, hon', is somethin', accordin' to my way of thinkin',

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to pay a purty high price to escape from. And that's entirely up to you. It's a literal question of to die or not to die, and I cain't rightly help you to decide."

Margery Corbin stared in anguish from one man to the other. Red Wilpin, under the tan, was pale, and his eyes were of a deeper blue than she had ever seen them. She knew that every sense was alert; that his hair-trigger mind was acutely sensitive to all that was taking place in the room—the arrangement of a seat behind the bar for Judge Oglethorpe, the disposition of a chair against an outside wall for a witness stand and of a cluster of chairs nearby for the several witnesses; the undercurrent of impatience that still ebbed in a flow of murmurs amongst the crowd; the imminence of heavily armed men near by—significantly near by—who would shoot Red Wilpin in his tracks at the slightest suspicious move. She knew that he was sensitively aware of all this, and she marveled at his coolness, his audacity in the face of it. And from him she stared at Julius Yost.

The eyes of the Easterner, always so murky, were aglow with a meaningful fire; and a familiar smile of cynical amusement was twisting his pale, thin, cruel lips. He saw that she was gripped with indecision and doubt, and he was quick to profit thereby.

"Remember, dear heart, what I'm offering to you, many other nice little girls have been delighted to accept. And it isn't so distasteful, you know—a luxurious apartment with every modern convenience, your own French maid, your own limousine and Japanese chauffeur, the very latest Parisian gowns, jewels by the quart, an unlimited allowance, travel to strange and fascinating lands, all the new plays, the opera, fine horses if you care for horses, a yacht perhaps, and, in addition, the loving care of a husband who will adore you to the tips of your little pink toes!"

"And against that," Red Wilpin put in, "hangin' by yore neck from a cottonwood tree until you're daid enough to be shot full of holes by these yere desert rats, hoss thieves, cattle rustlers, scarlet women, and so on."

"But—but," the poor girl stammered, "you don't mean that you want to marry me, do you, Mr. Yost?"

The dilettante chuckled. "I am not the marrying kind, as I told you this morning. But—yes, I will marry you!"

The girl wrung her hands. Hell's Delight was a garish blur through her tears.

"Is there no other choice?" she wailed. "I don't want to marry you!"

"And there's mighty little time left," Julius said curtly, "to make up your mind. Court is going to be called to order very shortly. Speak up, my dear! What is it to be—a life of ease and contentment and luxury—or a violent death at the end of a rope and then—a nameless grave?"

Despairingly she looked from the face of one man to the face of the other. Red Wilpin's lips were set in a thin line. His expression betrayed not the slightest emotion. His eyes were fixed upon some object across the room. It was as if he were not in the least concerned with the momentous decision with which she was confronted. It was, indeed, as if she had ceased to exist for him.

And from his expressionless visage she glanced at Julius Yost. His smile was no longer cynical, but gentle and tender; and his brown eyes were warm with affection and hope.

"Think, my dear, think!" he counseled her. "But make your choice quickly. Is it to be my loving arms and the luxuries and peace my fortune can afford you—or a disgraceful death and a nameless grave?"

Suddenly Hell's Delight was filled with a reverberant pounding as Judge Oglethorpe, seated on a pile of soap boxes on which a chair was mounted behind the bar, hammered with the butt of an automatic pistol.

"Order in the court!" he thundered.

"Quick!" cried Julius.

Margery Corbin threw back her head and drew in a long breath. She flung out a hand toward the witness stand.

"Go up there," she panted, "and lie yourself black in the face, you despicable coward! I prefer to die! Larry, I'd rather hang than surrender to him. I love you and —I'm not afraid to die!"

The indifference of Red Wilpin had suddenly vanished. An uprush of crimson

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stained his bronzed cheeks, and his blue eyes were misted over. With a groan he caught her into his arms and found her lips, and they clung together, desperately; for it was, they knew, their last kiss.

"Separate them!" Judge Oglethorpe snapped. "I am sick and tired of watching this spooning couple."

Rough hands snatched the lovers apart.

Once again Judge Oglethorpe banged on the bar with the butt of the pistol.

"Court is open!" he barked. "The first case on the docket is that of Lawrence Wilpin versus the People of this fair, beautiful and peace-loving community. And the charge against him is: wantonly and premeditatedly attacking and robbing upon a public thoroughfare peaceful, helpless, innocent and inoffensive citizens of this great republic! The trial of Lawrence Wilpin, stage robber, will begin!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

IS JUSTICE BLIND?

SILENCE fell in Hell's Delight—a silence punctuated only by the gurgling and hissing of corncob pipes, the labored breathing of tensely constricted throats and the grumble of the approaching tempest.

This silence was rudely broken by the angry shout of the accused man.

"I object!" shouted Red Wilpin.

Judge Oglethorpe leaned outward and glared down at him.

"On what grounds, may I ask?" he inquired impatiently.

"On the grounds, yore honor, that the charge ain't based on the truth. In the fust place, my holdin' up of that stage coach wasn't premeditated."

"You are attempting to obstruct the machinery of the law," his honor stated irritably, "by cloaking the issue at stake in a trifling technicality. The objection is overruled."

"All right, jedge, all right, but that ain't all. Another thing you stated in yore charge as that the pussons I robbed was peaceful, helpless, innocent and inoffensive."

"Well?" the judge snapped.

"I object, yore honor, to the word 'inoffensive' as applied to this yere white-faced lizard, Julius Yost."

Judge Oglethorpe looked thoughtful.

"That objection is sustained," he pronounced. "Let it be noted that the charge is amended to read: 'Peaceful, helpless and innocent citizens of this great republic.' We will now proceed. Mr. Yampdon, Mr. Yost and Mrs. Yost—will you kindly sit down in those chairs reserved for witnesses? And Marshal Sniffin, I should like to have you serve as bailiff with certain elastic powers. You may delegate or deputize as many heavily-armed men as you may require to guard the accused and the material witness."

"I object!" Red Wilpin shouted.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake," Mrs. Yost wailed, "make that insufferable young ape hold his tongue! This trial is a farce. It's a senseless waste of time."

Judge Oglethorpe banged on the bar with his pistol butt.

"What's the accused's objection?"

"It ain't fair to call that gal a material witness yet," Red said angrily. "You ain't proved it, have you?"

"It doesn't have to be proved!" Mrs. Yost retorted spiritedly. "We know it's true!"

"Another thing I object to," the prisoner put in vigorously, "is callin' Yumpa a fair, beautiful and peace-lovin' community. Say, where do you get that stuff, judge? Just look around the court room here! Did you ever see a bigger collection of white-livered, low-down human polecats in yore life outside the bars of a penitentiary? Great gosh, judge, this town is noted fer its sin and vice and corruption. Yumpa ain't nothin' but a cesspool of inquity."

A roar from the crowd stopped him. There were cries of "Hang him!" and "Burn him at the stake!" Judge Oglethorpe became red in the face, pounding and pounding on the bar, before order was restored.

"Before we can proceed with the case of Lawrence Wilpin versus the people," he stated, "the point which the defendant has raised must be settled."

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A burly hard rock miner who had been dozing on one of the roulette tables rubbed his eyes and sat up.

"Whut was th' p'int, yore honor!" he wanted to know.

"The question before the court," Judge Oglethorpe explained in a clear, decisive voice, "is whether Yumpa is a fair, beautiful and peace-loving community, as I stated in my charge, or a cesspool of iniquity, noted for its sin and vice and corruption, and peopled by white livered human polecats—those are the defendant's words, I believe."

"He's a dirty leetle liar!" the miner roared. "Whut you said about Yumpa is true, yore honor, so help me Gord!"

The judge smiled benevolently. "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?" he said amiably.

"Shore I do!" the miner snapped. "Mebbe in th' coss o' my life, yore honor, I ain't always been as law-abidin' and respectable as my pore daid mammy and pappy prayed I was a goin' to be, but one thing, jedge, I c'n say fer meself, is that I ain't never in the coss of my life told a falsehood.

"And I'll tell ya why, jedge. When my mammy lay on her deathbed, after bein' cruelly and foully struck down by a mountain lion while a milkin' th' cow, she says to me, 'Sonny,' she says, 'get down thar on th' floor on yore leetle knees,' she says, 'and make yore dyin' mammy a promise.' And when I got down on my knees like she done commanded me, she placed her worn old hand on my leetle haid, she says, 'Sonny,' she says, 'I want ya should promise me th't, no matter whut ya may do in life, whut crimes ya may commit if need be, ya'll never, so long as ya live, tell nobody a lie. Will ya promise me that, lad, fer I'm a dyin', lad, I'm a dyin' and I can hear them angels singin', lad.'

"And, jedge, I looked my pore dyin' mammy square in the eye and I says, 'Mammy dear,' I says, with the tears a runnin' down my leetle face, 'Mammy dear,' I says, 'I swear to ya,' I says, 'no matter whut crimes I commit, I'll never so long as I live, tell a lie to nobody.'

"And with that, my pore old mammy let out a screech and flopped up into th' air, jedge, two foot off'n th' bed, and when she come down, her pore old eyes was closed and my pappy says, 'Sonny,' he says, 'yore leetle mammy's daid.'"

The burly miner hung his head. There was not a dry eye in the court room. There was even a suspicious moisture in the eyes of Judge Oglethorpe, and he dabbled at this unashamedly with a large blue-hemmed silk handkerchief.

"And from that day to this," the miner said in a husky voice, "I ain't never broke my oath to my dyin' mammy."

The judge smiled through his tears and sighed.

"My friend," he said gently, "it is just such great, true, noble-hearted men as yourself who have made the Southwest what it is. Speaking for us all, I want you to know how sincerely and gratefully we appreciate your offer to be of service. If you will kindly take the witness stand, we will proceed."

With the two revolvers at his hips rustling in their leather, the miner awkwardly mounted the witness stand and gazed out shyly over the crowded court room.

"In the absence of a duly qualified district attorney," the judge decreed, "I will ask you the necessary questions. I believe I may say, with all modesty, that I am in a position to enact a dual—nay!—a triple rôle. In the past I have served successively as a practising attorney, a district attorney, and a judge, so that, with your permission, I will conduct the trial in that triple capacity.

"What in Sam Hill," Red Wilpin demanded, "do you mean by that, yore honor?"

Judge Oglethorpe gave him a chilling glance.

"I mean, prisoner, that I will act first as prosecuting attorney, then as attorney for the defendant, and when, if, and as the occasion demands, as the judge."

"Do ya mean, judge," the prisoner gasped, "that you're a goin' to act as my lawyer?"

"Exactly! And as the prosecuting attorney."

"I object!" Red Wilpin roared.

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"Objection overruled!" his honor snapped. "You are an ungrateful whelp! I am offering you my years of experience as a practitioner of the law."

The bandit shook his curly red head. "Nothin' stirrin'. I'm a goin' to be my own lawyer."

"Very well, then," the judge said peevishly. "Bear in mind, I might have saved your worthless neck from the noose."

"Blah! I'll save my own neck, you big stiff!"

"Oh, you will, will you?" The judge's complexion was purple. "Well, we shall see about that, you dirty little crook!"

There was a rustle of murmurs in the court room. Judge Oglethorpe banged on the bar.

"Order in the court!" he shouted. "You people back there don't seem to understand," he went on irritably, "that this proceeding is a serious matter, and that the dignity of my position must be respected. I want silence and respect, and I'm going to have silence and respect!"

The rustling subsided. Judge Oglethorpe rested his chin upon an upturned forefinger, lodged his elbow on the bar, and with his finger as a pivot, turned and smiled upon the bearded man in the witness chair.

"What is your name, my man?" he asked.

"Arthur Globlon," the miner stated.

"I understand," the judge said pleasantly, "that it is the custom in this virile section of our great country for all men to have nicknames. May I ask what is yours?"

"Yes, yore honor," the man answered, nervously stroking his thick black beard, for he was still obviously embarrassed at being the cynosure of all eyes. "I have a nickname. Th' boys and gals hereabouts call me Dirty Neck Arthur."

"Quaint and no doubt fitting," the judge murmured absently. "Where were you born, Mr. Globlon?"

"In Dirty Water Junction, yore honor."

"How old are you?"

"I'll be nineteen my next birthday, yore honor."

"Why! You're only a boy!"

"I object!" Red Wilpin cried.

"My God!" the judge growled. "What are you objecting to now?"

"That man up thar is a liar, yore honor. His name ain't Globlon; it's Snarky. He wasn't born in Dirty Water Junction. He's a half-breed, th' son of a greaser sheep rustler and a Yaqui Indian woman who was a dope smuggler, and he's forty-six years old if he's a day. Ask him if it ain't so!"

The judge turned to the witness.

"Is what the defendant says true?"

"No," said the witness.

"Objection overruled," Judge Oglethorpe decided, and he shook an admonitory finger at the accused. "Young man, I want to assure you that you are gaining nothing by your attempts at frustating the objects of justice. You are only bringing disrepute to your own cause. I shall not warn you again. On your next offense, I warn you, I may seriously consider charging you with contempt of court."

Red Wilpin snorted disdainfully. "All right, ya big bag of wind."

"Bailiff," the judge said angrily, "if that smart aleck makes another crack like that, the court orders that you kick him in the shins."

Marshal Sniffin nodded grimly. "Bailiff will so please, your honor!" he snapped.

"You just try kickin' me in the shins," Red Wilpin said warningly, "and I'll knock you for a loop."

The crowd muttered. And above this undercurrent of sound came the voice of Margery Corbin, keyed high and shrill with anxiety.

"Oh, Larry, please don't hold up the trial. This suspense is killing me!"

Mrs. Yost sniffed and leaned over to whisper in Spavin Yampdon's ear. "The little harridan has something up her sleeve. Mark my word!"

Judge Oglethorpe brought the butt of the pistol crashing down upon the bar.

"Silence!" he thundered. "Now, Mr. Globlon," he said in gentler tones, "we will proceed. You have sworn to tell the truth, so far as it lies within your ability, concerning the moral character of this community. You will first answer a question with a flat yes or no. Is Yumpa, as the defendant claims, a cesspool of iniquity, noted

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for its sin and vice and corruption, and peopled by white-livered polecats?"

"No!" the witness shouted.

"And you can furnish proofs to support your asseveration?"

"My whut, jedge?"

"Your asseveration."

The witness looked more embarrassed than before. A guilty crimson stole up under his beard to his narrow, wrinkled forehead.

"Jedge," he whispered, "ain't that a naughty word?"

Judge Oglethorpe chuckled. "No, my boy, it merely means that you are stating what you believe to be truthful. I asked you if you could furnish proofs."

"Shore I can!"

"I'll bet you a thousand dollars you can't!" Red Wilpin exclaimed.

"I'll bet ya a million dollars I kin!" the witness roared.

"I'll bet you a billion dollars you can't!" the bandit shouted.

"I'll bet you a trillion dollars I kin!"

"I'll bet you a quadrillion dollars you can't!"

The witness opened his hairy old mouth again, but the wanted words would not come. He clasped his horny old hands and gazed imploringly at the judge.

"Yore honor, whut can I do? He wins! He's a better educated man than I am."

The judge was in a quandary. But suddenly his face lightened. Leaning forward he pointed a forefinger at Red Wilpin.

"Very well," he said. "Put up your money!"

"You know I ain't got that much on me," the prisoner exclaimed indignantly.

Judge Oglethorpe settled back in his seat. He banged on the bar.

"We've had enough of this horse-play. It is evident to me, and I am sure it is patent to all of you, that the accused is attempting by every imaginable device to obstruct the wheels of justice. I asked the witness a plain, unvarnished question. This bandit interrupted with a ridiculous wager and raised a question entirely aside from the issue at stake.

"The witness, under oath, answered my question. I have asked him to furnish proof in denial of the accused's assertion and in support of my own, namely, that Yumpa is a fair, beautiful, peace-loving community. The witness will now furnish such proofs as are in his possession."

The crowd in Hell's Delight settled back to listen.

"Yore honor," Dirty Neck Arthur Globlon began, stretching himself out comfortably in his chair, "and ladies and gents, I ain't accustomed, as most of ya know, t' speech-makin', but I'm a goin' to try to do my leetle best. The fust proof I have to offer his honor yere is this: Ef I had a leetle, innocent datter, say fifteen, sixteen years of age, and I wanted to have that leetle gal grow up in a town with a clean, decent, spiritchal atmosphere, I'd bring her to Yumpa."

Judge Oglethorpe leniently permitted the cheering to run its course. When it had subsided, he asked:

"Are you a married man, Mr. Globlon?"

"Nope."

"Any children?"

"Great gosh, jedge, snap out of it!"

The judge blushed at his careless mistake.

"Are there any married men in the court room?" he inquired. "I wish the married men present would raise their right hands."

Half the men in Hell's Delight raised their hands.

Judge Oglethorpe leaned forward, a faint smile at his lips.

"Those of you married men who agree with Mr. Globlon that Yumpa is an ideal place to bring a fifteen or sixteen year old girl who is innocent and, permit me to add, beautiful, will kindly signify in the usual manner."

The room echoed with "Ayes!"

"I'll tell the world," Red Wilpin muttered, "that this here gang shore hankers to see young, beautiful and innocent little girls brought to Yumpa!"

"*Honi soit qui mal y pense!*" Julius Yost sneered.

"What does that mean?"

"It means, 'Evil be to him who evil thinks!'"

"Well," Red Wilpin snorted, "you sure are due for a share of evil."

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Judge Oglethorpe ignored this by-play.

"I think," he said, "that the point has been satisfactorily proved. Have you any other proofs, Mr. Globlon?"

"Wall, I shore ought t' have, yore honor. I'm a charter member of th' Yumpa Epworth League, I'm one of th' founders of th' Yumpa Society fer th' Suppression of Vice, I'm on th' board of governors of th' Yumpa Rotarians, and I'm one of th' pillars of th' Yumpa Y. M. C. A."

Judge Oglethorpe nodded gravely. "And from your experience and observations," he asked, "you consider that you are in a position to state with authority that Yumpa is a fair, beautiful and peace-loving community?"

"Sech is my firm and sacred opinion, yore honor."

The judge gazed at Red Wilpin with a smile of amusement and triumph.

"Have we satisfied you?" he scornfully inquired. "Have we proved to your full pleasure that Yumpa is a community in which vice and evil and corruption do not exist in any form? If not, speak up—or forever after hold your peace!"

Red Wilpin hung his head. He had nothing to say.

"Very well!" the judge cried. "We will now go forward with the trial of Lawrence Wilpin."

There was a shrill-voiced interruption.

Margery Corbin had sprung to her feet. Her cheeks were pink with excitement. Her large, dark eyes shone. Her pink lips were parted slightly upon her snowy white teeth. She was a beautiful and appealing little figure in her dark riding jacket, her whipcord breeches and trim riding boots.

"Wait a minute!" she cried with her little fists clenched at her side. "There has been a miscarriage of justice!"

The judge stiffened in his chair.

"Whatdaya mean, a miscarriage of justice?" he said indignantly.

The girl flung out her hand and pointed at the man on the witness stand.

"I mean, your honor," she said breathlessly, "that that man is crazy!"

"Crazy?" Judge Oglethorpe intoned.

Red Wilpin slapped his lean thigh emphatically.

"Crazy as a bedbug," he affirmed.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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WHEN CHEEK MEETS CHEEK

WHEN cheek meets cheek
In the dusk of a summer night,
When cheek meets cheek,
Though it really isn't right,
When cheek meets cheek,
To the moan of the saxophone,
And the note, high, thin,
Of the violin,
And the voice of the slide trombone—

When cheek meets cheek,
And the slow feet follow the tune,
When cheek meets cheek,
And the window frames a moon,
When cheek meets cheek,
To the sound of the music's whine,
Why, all I pray
Is just that they
May be your cheek and mine!

Mary Carolyn Davies.

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Black or Blue

By LAURIE YORK ERSKINE

Author of "In the Event of Death," "The Laughing Rider," etc.

A NOVELETTE—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

IT is feared that the bandit, Conway, has returned to these parts for the purpose of making good the threat he made last March, when, after lifting a small sum of money from Bruce Halliday, the well-known paymaster of the Consolidated Mines, he swore to return and get the company's pay roll, because the criminal who held up the Grover car last night was disguised with the same colored blue bandanna handkerchief that last March gained for the bandit the nickname of Black Conway.

Having summed up the foregoing dark suspicion in one long, breathless sentence, it is quite probable that the reporter of the Prairie Grass *Daily Echo* left his desk with the feeling that the finest traditions of journalism had been thereby notably upheld. He would never know the supercilious smile which that article was destined to bring to the weary exchange editors of great dailies, and he would never know what the columnists who live on that sort of thing would do with it; but he no doubt had at least an inkling of the emotion it would stir in the breast of Bud Halliday, the well-known paymaster, for all Prairie Grass knew what Bud's job meant to him.

Bud made no secret of it. He gloried in it. What Bud's job meant to him was precisely what Marion Grover meant to him; and to Bud Halliday Marion Grover meant the breath of life. To Bud Halliday Marion was life itself. And now, into the world which he had regarded with such high confidence since the moment he had discovered that Marion was more than one of those females, came this enlightening achievement of local journalism.

Bud sat in the office and wrinkled his

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brow over it. He was twenty-seven years old, was Bud, and he'd gained his job because his father, who held it before him, had sickened and become old at the age of fifty-three. But, in spite of his twenty-seven years, since first he stepped into his father's shoes Bud had been regarded by old Michael Moon as strictly on probation.

This irritated Bud, because Bud, knowing himself to be a man, resented being treated as a boy. He had said as much to Moon, and had said, furthermore, that being a man he could handle any man's job there was to handle. The old man had chuckled at that, because Bud in his manner and appearance suggested a boy of twenty-one.

Old Moon had been with the company many years. He had known the West when specie had been carted down from the mountains with a bodyguard of expert gunmen, of whom the paymaster had been the quickest to deal death or take it. And to old Moon, Bud Halliday was as a babe in arms. So he chuckled when Bud spoke of men's jobs and his ability to fill them.

"You youngsters these days don't know what a man's job is," he said. "You got to face trouble before yer know that."

And Bud had laughed in that boyish way he had; he laughed because the old man's words made him angry.

"Just bring out your trouble any time," he replied. "I'm ready for it."

II.

But two weeks later Bud found his trouble and he wasn't ready for it. Riding over to Clay City, where the mines were, with some petty cash for the store, he had cantered into a tall rider with a dark handkerchief over his face. Also he had cantered into touch with the muzzle of a forty-five held firmly in the hand of that same rider, and he had sat there with his arms aloft while the petty cash was taken away from him.

He found little consolation in the fact that the hold-up artist, having expected to lift the monthly pay roll of the mines, was passionately disappointed in getting only two hundred and ten dollars, for humiliation sat too heavily upon him.

Then he came in and reported the matter with an excitement in his voice for which he kicked himself later, and was further embarrassed by having to admit that the handkerchief used by the bandit as a mask, which he had described in that report as black, was, in the light of calm remembrance, blue. A small matter, but the source of infinite glee to the sheriff, at Clay City, who had always held that the payroll should be guarded by his person.

After that hold-up, Stockbridge, the sheriff, referred to Bud's highwayman as "Black Conway," the surname having been made public in a letter to the press which the graceless criminal had written by way of making known his intention of returning some day for the pay roll he had missed.

The words "Black Conway" never failed to gain a chuckle from old Moon now, and that chuckle served always to remind Bud Halliday that he held his job strictly on probation. A matter for serious consideration; a subject for darkest speculation. For with the loss of that job he would also lose for an indefinite time all hope for the certain happiness which Marion Grover had promised him.

Old Moon didn't chuckle this morning however, for he too had read his *Daily Echo*. He gazed across the office at Bud Halliday's perturbed face as it bent over the untidy pages of the paper and in his mind he carefully appraised the situation. No care could be too great, felt old Michael Moon, for the monthly pay roll of the Consolidated Mines, due on the express that night, amounted to twenty thousand dollars; also there was Bud Halliday to be considered, and old Moon had never in his life considered any sum of money whatever before the welfare of a human being. It is one of the redeeming features of the old West that manhood always came first.

Bud didn't know that the old man appraised him. He sat with the paper in his hand and frowned while a sense of positive relief took possession of him.

Conway, it seemed, had come back at last. At last he was to have the chance to show the world—and Marion—that he could handle trouble. Old Moon saw the

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young man's blunt face lighten as this feeling overcame him, and he liked the resolute set of the firm lips, the uptilt of Bud Halliday's nose; he liked the even, unperturbed line into which the wide brow settled as Bud Halliday, foreseeing trouble, determined to cope with it.

"This looks bad, Bud." The old man's high tenor voice pierced the early morning stillness of the office with a clamor that accentuated the fact that they were alone. Bud looked up from his paper with his unfailing grin.

"Forewarned's forearmed," he said, and spoke as though in response to a challenge.

"Wouldn't be surprised you'd better let Stockbridge an' some of his men take the pay roll up to Clay City to-morrow," suggested Moon.

Bud's lips drew tightly across his teeth.

"As long as I'm paymaster here, Mr. Moon," he said, "the company funds will always go over to Clay City in my personal charge."

Old Moon frowned.

"It's twenty thousand dollars," he pointed out.

Bud arose and addressed him very steadily.

"You mean Stockbridge is more likely to keep it safe than I am?"

"Well, he's the sheriff now, Bud. Seems like to me, it's up to him to see the law ain't broke." The old man spoke very carefully, measuring his words. But Bud ignored those words. He continued with the thread of his own thought.

"You're wrong. Think it over and you'll see that you're wrong!" he cried. "For three months they've been hunting for this Conway guy, and Grover gave Stockbridge his word that if he wasn't caught we'd have a new sheriff. You know that what Grover says goes, and so does Stockbridge. So what does your sheriff do? He gives out that Conway got out of the country—driven out by the sheriff I suppose!" Bud's voice became as sarcastic as was possible in the face of his grin. "And Conway proves how far away he's been by sticking up old Grover himself and telling him to call off his sheriff and put him to bed. That would be a fine man to protect your twenty thousand dollars!" He turned back to the paper with a snort. "Yes it would!" He finished witheringly.

Moon grinned appreciatively. No Prairie Grass man has ever heard the rival town of Clay City derided with regret, and Stockbridge was a Clay City product.

"Conway *might* have been out of the country at that," he protested.

"Then how did he know Grover was out to get him?" The old man's doubt nettled Bud. "You can bet he didn't hold Grover up just to pick his pocket. It was like that letter he wrote to the paper. He just wanted to show Grover he was here to stay till he got that pay roll. Well, watch him get it! I'm not trusting Stockbridge to bungle this job for me, and I'm not asking help from anybody except myself. If I need men I'll call for them. If I need the sheriff I'll let him know. This is my job now, Mr. Moon, and if you want to put that pay roll in anybody else's hands you'll have to fire me and get a new paymaster before that money arrives to-night!"

He stopped short, and above the grin his eyes sparkled ominously; for old Moon was serious no longer, he was chuckling.

"Think it over!" snapped Bud; and without waiting for a reply, he slammed out of the office.

III.

THE streets of Prairie Grass are treeless and rolling, for it is not more than a collection of buildings reared on the open prairie. That one street which begins at the depot and ends at the Grover House (for Marion's father owned the hotel as well as the sheriff) is devoid of even such sparse shrubberies as bedeck the residential byways of the town, for it is paved with cement and hedged with brick. It is called Main Street.

Bud Halliday, emerging from the offices of the Consolidated Mines, found himself seared and blinded by the harsh, devouring sunlight of a summer morning. He also found himself confronted by Stockbridge, the sheriff.

"Good morning, Bud," drawled the officer of the peace. "Seems there's trouble brewin'. Need any help?"

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Bud looked into the man's long brown face, and centered his gaze upon the weak, receding chin. He smiled, speaking softly.

"Who's sheriff now, Ed?" he asked genially.

Up came the weak chin, the skin wrinkling about the point of it.

"Why, I guess that's me, if you want to know." Stockbridge snapped out his reply pugnaciously.

"Why, I'm mighty glad to hear it," grinned Bud. "Thought there might have been a change. Grover was talkin' sort of big about getting this Conway."

"Shore. *Black* Conway," Stockbridge sneered.

"Blue, running to lavender," corrected Bud. "You know since the county authorities fell down on the job the company's had to go to considerable expense for their protection. Too bad."

The vindictive gleam reappeared in the sheriff's eye.

"What expense?" he growled.

"Well, they've had to put a steel cage up in the office over at Clay City," said Bud. "You know that."

"Yeah," admitted Stockbridge. "What else?"

"Field-glasses," went on Bud. "They've sent East for a pair of the best to give the new sheriff. Good-by. I'll let you know when I need your help."

He left Stockbridge in a state of worried meditation; the sheriff couldn't quite understand about those field-glasses.

IV.

It had at first been an amazing and disquieting experience for Bud Halliday to discover how dependent you are upon a girl when you fall in love with her. He had lived in Prairie Grass just three years longer than Marion Grover, because he was three years older than she, and he had known her more or less intimately, as a boy will know a girl in such a metropolis as Prairie Grass, for some twenty of those twenty-seven years. Then it happened. Quite suddenly.

One day she was merely a female member of the community; the next day she was the only girl in the world. Bud couldn't have told you how it happened; he couldn't even tell you which day it was. But unexpectedly, without any warning whatever, he discovered that he was in love. And it was, at first, disquieting.

He found himself seeking her out at odd intervals; seeking her out because it was the most important thing in the world that he should see her and speak with her. When he found himself with her he inevitably found that he had nothing to say. But her presence was a consolation to him in spite of the fact that reason suggested no need for consolation; and her face, her carriage, her voice—things he had known but never noticed for twenty years—were inexpressibly satisfying. Deeply necessary for his peace of mind. He found himself walking beneath the windows of her house at night.

On this morning, however, Bud felt that he had real need to visit her. Anyway he had long since lost the self consciousness with which at first he approached her, and now quite shamelessly haunted the Grover residence with the settled realization of his fate.

He mounted his pony in the alley behind the office with no compunction for the desertion of his routine duties, and went single footing away from Main Street as serenely as though he rode forth to keep a most urgent appointment in the business of the Consolidated Mines, instead of a mere appointment in the business of life, which, as every one knows, has no urgency whatever.

He trotted by the white, gray, red and yellow frame houses which were Prairie Grass as though he were headed for the white, gray, red and yellow prairie that stretched far beyond the boundaries of the town and disappeared into the misty foothills where lay Clay City. But at the end of that dusty street, he swung into a lane that was bound on his right by a straggling line of dwellings so democratic as to be grotesque in the contrasts which they presented, and bound on his left by a hedge of mesquite which separated the town from the prairie.

Picking out a large, gray pile of concrete, timber and fretwork, he permitted his pony

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to follow the well accustomed roadway to the barnyard, and vaulted to the ground just in time to halt Marion Grover as she entered the kitchen of the house.

"Good morning!" he shouted cheerfully.

"Oh, hello, Bud," replied she; and Bud instantly divined that something was amiss.

There was no warmth in the sound of her voice. He strode forward with an impulsive protest on his lips, but let it die as he saw that another stood on the kitchen steps above her; a tall, masculine figure which filled the doorway and imposed itself impressively upon the homely scene.

"Oh, you're here," said Bud. His tone held as little warmth as Marion's greeting had possessed.

"Just dropped in," soothed the masculine figure. "How's the mining business this morning?"

"You ought to know," grinned Bud, who was always maddened by this man's condescending voice. "You got a mine of your own."

That was meant to be an excessively cutting remark, for the entire county knew that the old Peabody mine was as barren of pay dirt as a mule is of humor, and James Fenton, having come to Clay City six months before, had already earned the soubriquet of "Crazy Jim" for the time and money he put in "foolin' 'round that old hole in the ground."

But Bud's rejoinder conspicuously failed to cut out Mr. Fenton. He smiled serenely.

"I'm afraid they stuck me with that mine," he admitted. "Still there are compensations."

Bud didn't like the way Fenton looked into Marion's eyes as he said this. The polished, rather handsome Easterner—for he admitted St. Louis as his home—was plainly fishing for sympathy. What was worse in the eyes of Bud, he plainly felt confident of getting it, and what was still worse, it seemed that he did.

"What are they, Mr. Fenton?" asked Marion eagerly; and she managed to convey, with amazing facility, a glance of solicitude to Fenton at almost the same instant as she shot a baffling mischievous smile at Bud.

"Well, I don't have to protect a twenty thousand dollar payroll, for instance," said Fenton.

Bud, grinning moodily upon Marion's bright countenance sought in vain for the flash of indignation with which he felt she ought to reprove this unfeeling remark. So he provided the indignation himself. He did it very deftly, very subtly

"You couldn't," he said.

"Oh, Bud!" exclaimed Marion reprovingly. And that made Bud like the magnificent Fenton less than ever.

But Fenton was very courteous about it. He deprecated Marion's defense of his dignity, and so quickly subdued the green flash that gleamed for an instant in his fine dark eyes that Bud never even noticed it.

"He may be right," said Fenton, talking Bud over with Marion as though Bud had been an impertinent small boy. "No one has offered to even try my theory."

"What theory do you mean?" cried Marion; and Bud suppressed a snarl, a spirit like that of an outraged beast, which rose in his mind, turning the world red before him; for he knew that a few days ago that note in her voice had been reserved for him alone.

Before Fenton's presence had become a common thing at the Grover home, Marion would have greeted no one but Bud Halliday with that note of eager interest in his thoughts and plans and achievements. He reflected bitterly that Fenton's visits had become more common, and more welcome since that dark day of his humiliation on the Clay City road, and he wondered if that humiliation could really have been so shameful as the world—and Marion—seemed to feel it was.

He suppressed the snarl, however, and fell back upon what, if he had but known it, was an infinitely less effective course. He fell back upon sarcasm, and he knew nothing whatever about it.

"Why, yes, Mr. Fenton!" he cried with elaborate sincerity. "You really must tell us about your theories!"

This time Fenton addressed him unmistakably. His brown face, finely molded, handsomely proportioned, was set in a peculiar smile.

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"I knew you'd be interested," he said; and Bud decided that, some day, he must kill this man.

Fenton was too catlike, too subtle to be called a man, in the opinion of Bud Halliday. If Bud had known something of the world beyond the Prairies which bounded his home town, he would have known that the quality in Fenton which caused him instinctively to fear and dislike the man beyond the fear and dislike of wholesome rivalry, was a quality of almost feminine insight; something which was not quite human.

"My theory," the even, modulated voice of Fenton continued, "is that this Conway who has run Stockbridge such a chase, has pulled the wool over your sheriff's eyes because he uses his brains in a way you people haven't learned."

"Shore," said Bud. "If we used our brains the way he does we'd all be in the State pen."

Fenton smiled tolerantly. Bud's fingers itched.

"You don't understand what I mean." Fenton turned to Marion, obviously appealing to one whom he felt confident *would* understand. "What I mean is that you are dealing with a man who can't be dismissed as a common criminal. It doesn't appear as if you have a single man in the county who is capable of seeing Conway in any other light save that of another Jesse James. Certainly none of your officials can; and yet this particular bandit is as far removed from Jesse James as Robin Hood was removed from Ali Baba."

"How do you mean?" Marion hung on the young man's words as though he spoke prophecies and uttered unfathomable truth.

Bud, standing a little below them both, saw them as the spectator at a play sees the actors on the stage above him. The still clearness of the air and the unabating glare of the yellow sunlight which bathed the picture added to the effect of drama, and at the same time as he realized that no chosen beauty of the footlights could present a picture more fair, more infinitely alluring than Marion as she stood there in the sunlight, Bud Halliday grudgingly admitted that no actor he had seen could have appeared more picturesque, more handsome in the fine proportion of feature and of limb than Fenton did as he loomed above her, seeking her eyes with his compelling gaze.

Bud learned new things in his capacity for hatred as he watched these two; and he discovered a new element in the illimitable manifestations of love. Love, he learned, could be painful; love could be well nigh intolerable.

And Marion, her eyes warmly gazing into the handsome face of Crazy Jim Fenton, wanted to know just what his infernally insulting estimate of the intelligence of all Clay County meant.

"I mean," said Fenton, "that Conway has a sense of humor."

As he spoke, Fenton gazed down upon Bud Halliday with such a calm assumption of infallible percipience as would have bereft many a good humored man of his temper and his dignity. But Bud, in the presence of the girl, was in armor clad. Flatly disobeying the voice within which demanded that he slay Fenton out of hand, he grinned desperately into Marion's eyes, trying in vain to read them.

"Sense of humor," he said. "Sure. I'll bet he can even see something funny in Stockbridge."

"Now you're speaking sarcastically," smiled Fenton. "Always a dangerous thing. It leads to errors of judgment. You suggest that it's nothing unusual for a criminal to see something funny in the efforts of a stupid officer to capture him. You are mistaken. Only one criminal in a million, one in a generation, ever finds real fun in being chased. That's the kind of criminal you have here. This Conway is the type of bandit who goes down in history. He can play with Stockbridge as a cat plays with a mouse, because Stockbridge is a fool. But he can also play with your Consolidated Mining Company; and, if you will forgive me"—a most courteous gesture here, for the benefit of Marion, who, to Bud's chagrin, acknowledged it with a brilliant smile—"he also plays with Mr. Grover. And these men are no fools.

"He robs the paymaster of a trivial sum. The humiliation of that mistake would have caused almost any ordinary criminal

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to seek pastures new, or, if he were more persevering than most, to play himself into the hands of the sheriff. But not this Conway. Conway writes to the newspaper and promises to return for the pay roll. He laughs, do you see? He laughs at himself, at the sheriff, and at you. Mr. Grover thereupon decides to 'get him.'"

Words can't convey the irony with which Fenton spoke.

"What does our criminal do? Does he run away? Does he lie low? No. He runs the sheriff a pretty chase, a wider chase than you know of, and then he holds up Mr. Grover himself, takes his watch and pocket money, and tells him to put his sheriff to bed. You see? He laughs. This bandit has a sense of humor, and you'll never catch him unless you use methods akin to his."

Fenton seemed so possessed by his theory that as he spoke his voice lifted from the supercilious bantering tone with which he had at first taunted his hearer, to a warm note of conviction; an almost dramatic effect of declamation.

"What methods? How?" Marion's voice fitted the sparkle in her eyes, and betrayed the warm interest which Fenton's words had aroused in her. Bud glowered, his gaze dropping from her bright countenance where he was to have found solace, to the dark earth which more nearly matched his mood.

"*His* methods!" cried Fenton, his voice ringing with theatrical conviction. "He uses trickery! He robs in practical jokes! Play such a joke on him, and, like every joker, he will fall into his own trap!"

Even Bud Halliday could not resist the exuberant conviction of that voice. Against all his instinct and desire, Bud looked up, interested, and dropped his eyes again as he saw how Fenton fixed Marion with his gaze.

"If I had this pay roll to deliver," cried the impassioned theorist, "I should deliver it in a manner which made every movement unexpected. And I'd get him. I would! I swear I'd save that pay roll and put Conway behind the bars!"

"But how? How?" Marion cried.

"Yes. How?" Bud's cry was a challenge.

Fenton smiled.

"*I'll tell you how. Do nothing he will* expect. The pay roll comes in to-night, does it not? All right then. What do you do with it? You take it to the bank and deposit it overnight. In the morning you take it over to Clay City. In the afternoon the men are paid off. Now Conway knows all this. You may be sure of that. He's been here among us for two months. He'll know exactly how you move. All right then. Make every move differently. He may try to hold you up as soon as the money is taken from the train or on the way to the bank. You can prevent that by having a strong guard at the train, count your pay roll in the station under a dozen guns, and then—*Don't take it to the bank!*"

"Put it under my pillow, I suppose?" grinned Bud resentfully.

"No. Take it directly over to Clay City."

"But it will be easier for him to take it in that twenty miles of road than in the streets of the town," Marion protested.

Fenton smiled again, very tolerantly.

"Of course, but you must remember to do the unusual. Let the greater part of your men accompany an empty cash box to the bank. Let another party accompany an empty cash box up the main road to Clay City. Then let two good gunmen on two good horses race to Clay City with the pay roll by the back trails. And let them fire on sight at any one who approaches them."

He stopped short. Marion was staring at him as a disciple gazes on the master who utters eternal truth.

"Why, that's fine!" she cried. "That's dandy! Why, Buddy, how is it we never thought of that before?"

Which Bud, of course, instantly interpreted to mean: "What a pity you can't be as clever as the brilliant Fenton."

"I don't see how that's going to put Conway behind the bars," said Bud.

Fenton turned a gaze of patient condescension upon the grumbler.

"That's *my* part of it," he pointed out. "You ought to be glad enough to have your pay roll saved. I can attend to the other

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part when that money is safe in Clay City."

Bud eyed him ungratefully.

"Well, it's mighty good of you to trouble yourself about it," he said softly. "But of course, you appreciate that we can't permit any one outside the office to influence us in our methods of delivering the moneys of the company."

"Why, Bud Halliday!" Marion's indignant voice accused, tried and convicted him like a peal of thunder; and there is no knowing what hot retort from Bud might have wrought havoc in that moment, for Paley Grover emerged from the house and by his coming killed the words dead on Bud Halliday's lips. A man can't take a girl to task in front of her father, can he?

"Holding a village meeting?" asked Grover genially.

"No, just listening to a little wisdom," grinned Bud.

"How's minin'?" The older man flung the words at Fenton contemptuously.

Bud, having always respected Marion's father, now began to love him. Fenton, however, and to Bud's great amazement, made no reply. He smiled in the manner of a motion picture actor, conveying a great deal of greeting, understanding and geniality with his smile, but he said no word. Then he turned and bowed to Marion.

"I must be going," he announced. But the simple words astonished Bud indescribably, for Fenton had spoken them for all the world as an actor might have spoken. He assumed an entirely new and strikingly different voice for them; a deep, exceedingly quiet voice.

"I'll ride with you a way," offered Grover. "I'm goin' towards yore hole in the ground." He, too, seemed puzzled by Fenton's modulations of tone.

"Thanks," Fenton still murmured. "My car's in the town. He bowed and departed, striding around the house as an actor leaves the stage, self-consciously.

V.

Grover gazed after him.

"Queer stiff," he sniffed.

"He's terribly clever," protested Marion.

"Yeah. Doesn't know a mine from a hole in the ground," said Grover.

Bud stood on the step below Marion and watched her father as he disappeared into the barn. They stood silent until the older man had run his car out and had disappeared in the same direction as the unappreciated Fenton had taken. Then Bud indiscreetly opened fire.

"Your dad doesn't seem to think as much of Mr. Fenton as you do," he burst out. Then he wished he hadn't said it, because his words brought a cold glitter to her eyes, and she regarded him for a moment icily. Then her gaze softened.

"He's just like the rest of them," she replied. "It's just what Mr. Fenton said. You can't understand anything that's different."

Bud, having once brought that icy gleam into her beloved eyes, wasn't taking any further chances. He tried to think of something he might safely say. She, however, was before him.

"Buddy," she seized his arm with sudden warmth. "I want you to do just as he suggested!"

Bud didn't say anything. He just stepped up to her level on the steps and, seizing her by the shoulders, gazed into her eyes; but she read his protest in that gaze and shook her shoulders free.

"I do!" she cried. "I do! Because he is right, Bud! Don't you see that I want to see you come off best? *I* want you to win, to get the better of Conway this time. For your sake, for my sake, I want it! Mr. Fenton's right. Can't you trust me, Bud?"

Bud still frowned.

"I wish I could think you meant that," he said, ungraciously. "But I think you're listening to this fellow a lot more for his sake than for mine. And anyway, Marion, I can't let any chance enter into this. It's too important. Can't you see how I'll stand if the pay roll is lifted and I have to admit that I lost it following another man's plans? And Fenton's at that! You know what the men around here think of Fenton, don't you? They call him 'Crazy Jim.'"

But since his first ungracious words, a dangerous light had occupied Marion's eyes. With that light she now regarded him.

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"You're jealous!" she cried.

"I'm not!" he retorted.

"You are! You're afraid that you can't stand beside him when it comes to facing trouble!"

Poor Bud was dumfounded. It was as though his house crumbled beneath his feet.

"You think he's a better man than I am?" he cried.

"You don't know what I think," Marion spoke with a sudden softness. And, gazing into the changing lights of her gray eyes, Bud knew that she spoke the truth. He realized that she had something in her mind that was, for him, unfathomable.

"If you knew what I think," she laughed mischievously, "or if you weren't so silly, and could see it for yourself, you'd do what I tell you."

"Oh, and what's that?"

Again she laughed, then became suddenly and intensely serious. She became so serious in fact that for a moment Bud was alarmed. It seemed as though, abruptly, some tragic thought had occurred to her.

"What is it, Marion?" he cried.

"You must do this," she told him. "You must do it for the sake of everything I mean to you, and everything you mean to me! Buddy, there is something I know. I haven't got any reason for it, but I *know* it. You've got to do just what Mr. Fenton suggested, Bud. It's the most important thing in the world for you and for me!"

Bud's castle had fallen. It fell with her words, crashing down about him as she spoke; and he stood, as it were, wreathed in dust, half buried in debris; astounded, appalled, incapable of thought or reason. This girl to whom he had looked for solace was urging him to champion James Fenton. To vindicate the crazy "theories" of that repellent Easterner who had "talked her round."

"And how about *him*? Important for him, too, I suppose?"

"Buddy," she replied, and laid one hand on his shoulder. "Buddy, we've got a long way to go together." He had never been able to withstand this sort of thing. "And you must trust me. You've got to believe. Buddy, I wouldn't ask you."

What need to follow them further? Such moments of confidence and intimate association worked an incredible magic upon his mind. Before he left her he had agreed to try out the plan of the insufferable Fenton.

VI.

But Marion did not really win him over. There was something in Bud Halliday which was wise and cool; which did not surrender reason to the incomprehensible emotions with which this girl bound him. Something which was not romantic. He had agreed to adopt Fenton's subterfuge because she had imposed it upon him by the power of the emotion she could arouse within his breast. But away from her that cooler, more sensible part of him had its way.

It would be madness, said this reasonable self, to intrust the company's money and his good name to a woman's whim. And there was the further unsavory consideration that the whim in question was not for him. But Halliday would, in short, be hung, drawn and quartered before he would see the thing through.

So he turned his pony back again toward the Grover house, steeled to tell her that if she clung to this whim—he would remember that word, "whim," and use it—if she clung to this whim, their ways must part. That, too, appealed to him as a good way of putting it.

"Our ways must part," he would say. He prayed that she might not be so alienated from the love they had so far shared between them as to hold him to that sentiment; but if she was, he would stick to it. He rode out to the edge of the town for the second time that day, and his chin was firmly set, his heart steeled to contend with her whims.

Presently he drew in his pony to watch a slim horseman who rode like a swaying reed in the saddle of a lithe animal that sped fleetly away from the town toward the distant hills. For he recognized in that horseman Pat Grover, Marion's brother. There was no mistaking the perfect poise with which the boy sat in the saddle, or the mop of tow hair which was agitated in the

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wind of his devouring speed. And Pat Grover was speeding away toward the trail which led to the old Peabody Mine. What for?

The answer seared Bud Halliday's soul like a white hot iron. Marion was sending a message to the man, Fenton. And the white heat of the iron, entering Bud's soul, fired it into a blaze of anger and of hate.

He would follow the boy. He would wring from Fenton what that message was. He would tear it out of him. If Fenton did not deliver it, he would kill him. With a madness that surged in his heart, leaving his mind as clear and cold as ice, Bud galloped forth after the boy. What part the girl had in Bud's thought in that hot moment was chiefly concerned with a scene which he bitterly felt assured must inevitably come later.

But Bud never overtook that speeding boy. And he did not visit Fenton in his lair. He galloped carefully through the cañon trails and over the twisting hills until he came, strategically, to the chaparral forest that lay behind and above the mine which Fenton so fatuously worked; and in that thicket of brush and thorny scrub he rode with eyes downcast, closely seeking a trail which would bring him unsuspected upon his quarry, for it was in the light of a hunted thing that he had come to look on the perfidious Fenton. Surprise was to be the most important element of his approach.

And then, while his eyes examined the trail before him, they fell upon a tiny, almost indiscernible object which fluttered on the ground amid outcast cans, cartons and bottles. He drew up his pony with a jerk that set it to flinging its head wildly in the air. But Bud paid no attention to that. He slid from the saddle as though it was burning hot, and stooping, fixing his eyes on the ground, then snatched up the fluttering object which had caught his eye, and seeking found another exactly like it. He grinned then, and still grinning, he mounted, to trot back to Prairie Grass, his vengeful mission unfulfilled.

He met Stockbridge outside the depot, and, dismounting, addressed him curtly, but with a certain confidence, a note of incontestable command.

"I've got a job for you to-night, sheriff," he said.

Stockbridge grinned.

"Been thinkin' it over?" he scoffed.

"Been finding out facts," answered Bud. "I can hand Conway over to you to-night."

Stockbridge gasped.

"How come?" he asked.

"Just raise me fifteen men who can shoot, and play your hand like I want." Bud saw the doubt rise in the weak man's eyes. "You can have the glory," he added.

"Gimme the facts," protested Stockbridge.

So Bud gave him the facts, and Stockbridge hurried off to his flivver.

"I'll be down at the depot in two hours' time with anyways ten men that can shoot the holes out of a sieve," he promised.

VII.

THE depot at Prairie City that night resembled the guarded headquarters of any army in action. No mere citizen was allowed to approach within a block of it, and armed men trod the platform and the street beyond. If Conway could see the preparations made to greet the express messenger who was to deliver the company's pay roll, reflected Bud, it was not probable that he would laugh.

Bud himself sat in the station office, a long gun on his hip and an armed man on either side of him. Half sitting on the station agent's desk, Marion Grover was watching him anxiously.

"Where's the master mind?" asked Bud.

"Mr. Fenton told you plainly enough," she answered, "that this was your affair, not his." She regarded him for a moment with cool, inquisitive eyes. "For Heaven's sake, Bud, don't make any mistake. I know you've got something at the back of your mind, but don't let it ball this thing up." Her voice was tensely nervous. "We're playing with twenty thousand dollars, and they'll never forgive you if you lose it."

"I won't," Bud laughed, and Marion was vaguely conscious that he was taking his turn to baffle her. She could not understand that laugh. It seemed to contain some

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secret satisfaction which he held pent within him, beyond his boyish eyes, his honest grin. It troubled her.

"If Fenton's theory will put us through, we're all right," he assured her. "I'm following your friend's instructions to the letter. I hope he won't object to the small modification I have made."

"What's that?" she snapped him up with quick suspicion. She seemed exceedingly anxious, reflected Bud bitterly, that Fenton's plans should not miss fire.

"Just a detail," he replied. "The men who are riding to the bank will shoot to kill at the first stranger who approaches them. I've definitely specified what a stranger is. The men who take the road to Clay City, likewise. As for the men who take the hill trail—"

"Surely you don't mistrust my father," she interrupted coldly.

"No. I guess he and Stockbridge are as good for that job as any. Conway ain't going to laugh if he fools with them."

"I'm going, too."

"No!" He sprang from his chair, aghast.

"Dad's willing." She spoke as though he, Bud Halliday, had nothing to do with it.

"You can't!" he cried. "That's the most dangerous party of the lot. Where's your father?"

"He's still at the bank. But you'll be with us, too."

Then he smiled again, that baffling smile which she disliked because it hid something from her.

"No," he said. "I've got to be on the job somewhere else."

"Where?" she cried, aflame with suspicion.

"Here she comes," drawled the station agent; and a crescendo thunder announced the arrival of the night express.

Without answering the girl's question Bud leaped for the door and was out upon the platform as the great steel train plunged into the block and came hissing and roaring to a stop. Bud felt a stimulating sense of high adventure as he strode toward the express car, his gun loose in the holster, and a dozen armed men, likewise ready for action, all about him.

The passengers were held in the cars, the baggage men lined up away from the train while the express agent detrained with his bundle of money and was escorted to the agent's office. Here, jealously guarded, lay the pay roll of the Consolidated Mines until the train drew out and the platform and station buildings were again cleared by Stockbridge and his men.

Bud, sitting at the desk, the pay roll before him, grinned with that peculiar and pleasurable tension which the prize fighter must feel before the bell tolls for another round; which the football player enjoys as the whistle calls him out upon the field; which brings every true man to a resolution which surpasses confidence. For Bud Halliday the first round was over; he was alert now for the contingencies of round two, and he was not blind to the probability that he might yet be called upon to fight three or four or five rounds more before this bandit, this humorist, be vanquished.

He sat at the table filled with a sense of incredible power to control, to contend and to achieve. He felt all that went on about him, observing and noting all that was said and done. He knew that old Grover had entered and was engaged in earnest conversation with Marion. He knew that Stockbridge, surrounded by the men of his choosing, gave them instructions as a coach instructs the players before a game. There was an almost ludicrous atmosphere of suspended action in the little room.

Bud sat in the lamplight which flooded the table and deftly dealt with the currency for which he had signed acceptance as paymaster of the mines. He had before him a steel cash box and a leather pouch; on the floor at his side was a saddlebag.

"Close in." He spoke very softly, almost in a whisper, and Grover, leaving his place, came to stand closely at his side. Stockbridge, too, crossed over to stand beside him, and Marion furnished a screen across the table front. Bud felt an almost physical strain weigh down upon him as he sealed the bag and locked the box, while old Grover, deftly and unobserved by all save Bud and Marion and Stockbridge, placed the currency in the saddlebag.

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When the lock of the cash box clicked, Bud relaxed, seeing the saddlebag slide from his view as Grover dropped it to his side. He was conscious of a cold sweat which stood in beads on his forehead. He brushed his hand across his brow, and grinned up at Marion.

"If anything goes wrong—" he said.

She cut him short. "And who takes the pay roll to Clay City?" she asked in a clear, ringing voice.

All the men in the room fell into silence.

The door opened and old Moon entered. He strode over to the table where Bud stood with hand on the cash box.

"What now?" asked Moon. His voice was nervous, betraying his fear that the youngster might fall short. But his eye obviously approved the presence of the sheriff and of Grover, an old-timer who could be trusted.

"The money goes directly to Clay City," said Bud. "All right, Mason."

He turned to place in the hands of a trustworthy guard the cash box, empty of all save a dead weight of worthless paper. Mason, accepting it, turned to the door, calling for the men who were to accompany him. The group trouped out to the waiting automobile.

"Ain't you goin' with them?" Moon's voice was querulous, incredulous.

Bud shook his head, smiling. There was a momentous pause which held Moon spellbound, until the noise of the engine announced that the motor was under way.

"But who's there to take it?" Moon's voice rose in sharp protest, harshly breaking the silence which filled the room. Bud, save for a reassuring smile, ignored him.

"All right, Sanville." He handed to the lean plainsman whom he addressed the sealed leather bag which was as empty of valuable currency as the cash box had been. "Take that over to the bank. If any stranger butts in, you know what to do."

"I know." Sanville grinned and patted the butt of his unhampered gun. As he left the room he exchanged a grin with Grover. "See you later, boss," he said.

Sanville was Grover's man, loaned for this occasion.

Again there was a silence while Moon stared, bewildered, and the four other occupants of the room awaited the noise of another engine. With the several chosen guardians of the coveted pay roll present, the place had seemed very small. Now, with Marion and her father, Stockbridge, Moon and Bud left alone, it seemed absurdly large. Stockbridge, Marion and Grover were grouped at the doorway, and to Bud it seemed that a great space lay between them as he stood, his eyes glued to the saddlebag in Grover's hand; and again that sweat came to his brow.

"What in God's name?" cried Moon. His eyes, too, had caught the saddlebag. "Say, Bud, where's that money? Where's the pay roll?"

"Just a minute, Mike." Bud, his face tense with the realization of all that he staked in the safety of that saddlebag, held up his hand. From outside there came the noise of a cold engine roaring into life. They stood in silence until the raucous voice of gears enmeshed gave way to the receding hum of a motor car in swift passage.

"It's your turn now, Mr. Grover," said Bud softly.

Paley Grover smiled in a manner peculiar to himself. It was little more than a grim tightening of the lips.

"Yeah," he said, "it's my play." He, too, turned to the door, one hand on the butt of his gun, the other clutching the saddlebag. Stockbridge, as alert, but obviously the lesser man, followed him. They waited at the doorway a moment to permit Marion to precede them.

"Marion!" cried Bud. Then, addressing the world at large, rather than any one in particular: "She isn't going!"

Grover turned upon him as Marion left the room.

"Marion, she's riding with me," he grinned; and the door snapped to behind him.

Bud sank into the chair. Old Michael Moon strode up and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"Where's that money, Bud?" he demanded gruffly.

Bud sprang to his feet.

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"You come with me!" he cried. "You wanted to see me face trouble. Come with me!"

Still protesting, Moon followed him to the end of the platform, where two armed men awaited Bud Halliday with horses.

VIII.

SINCE Conway had made public his threat, the offices of the Consolidated Mining Company at Clay City had been inclosed in a cage of steel. As a result the company which gathered there the night when that pay roll arrived assumed the grotesque appearance of so many animals caged in some prodigious zoo.

When Fenton entered the building and stood in the tiny antechamber outside the imprisoning cage, he looked upon the gathering within much as the visitor to a monkey house might gaze upon the simian occupants behind the bars; and in the dim light his expression possessed something of the sardonic amusement with which mankind has ever regarded the monkey's antics. It was only when his eyes alighted upon Marion Grover that something of humanity's interest in man relieved his gaze.

She was the center of a moving group of men. Like a queen she sat at the desk of the superintendent, and the men moved about her as the drones encircle the center of the hive. They were talking, talking, and she replied to them seldom, holding them verbally at arms' length.

"If this is the money we are expecting, let us give you a proper receipt for it, and have the matter done with," said Hedge, the superintendent.

He addressed Paley Grover, who, still with his gun unhampered and the saddlebag clutched tightly in his hand, stood at ease behind his daughter's chair. Mason and the men who had long since arrived with him by motor lounged about the room, ill at ease, seldom quiet. Marion answered for her father.

"Bud Halliday will be here to attend to that." She spoke quietly, but her father seemed to acquiesce in his calm, good-humored silence.

"Is that he?" Mason, nearer the gate which communicated with the tiny antechamber in which Fenton stood, was quick to discern the man's figure, dim in the attenuated light which spread through the cage from the kerosene lamp on the desk. Fenton alone noticed the quick, glad start with which Marion turned to peer in his direction. He smiled.

"It's Fenton," he announced softly. It was the affected, unnatural voice with which he had addressed Paley Grover in the afternoon.

Mason grunted disgust. "It's Fenton," he said.

"What you want?" Hedge snapped out his question without courtesy.

"Since you're making use of my little scheme I thought I'd drop in and see how it's working," smiled Fenton coolly.

"What scheme?" Grover instantly challenged the supercilious camaraderie of Fenton's tone.

"Why, his scheme for the delivery of the money," Marion's clear voice rang out in the caged room like a bell. "It was he planned our little trick of triple delivery, you know."

Paley Grover turned upon her with drawn brows.

"I thought it was your idea," he growled.

"No, his!" she cried. "Let Mr. Fenton in, please, Mr. Hedge."

Hedge bridled at the command, for it was nothing less; but, emulating more than one man whom Marion Grover had dealt with, he obeyed it.

Fenton entered the cage with a charming air of friendliness—of confidence in his reception.

"Where's Stockbridge?" he asked lightly.

"Attendin' to business," growled Grover.

For an instant Fenton appeared disconcerted.

"And Halliday?" he added.

Hedge grinned.

"He's in conference," he said.

Again it was Marion who put the handsome Easterner at ease.

"There's no need for Mr. Stockbridge any longer," she smiled. "Thanks to you, Mr. Fenton, there's no need for any of us now. The pay roll is safe in Clay City!"

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Fenton all but purred.

"I hope this failure won't spoil Conway's sense of humor," he remarked.

But even his superb ego could not ignore the cold displeasure with which the assembled men of Clay County were regarding him.

"I don't guess there's any sense in stickin' round here making talk," rumbled Grover suddenly. "Here's the pay roll, Hedge; s'pose you gimme a little memoranda for it."

"But dad!" cried Marion in protest.

"That's all right, sis," he silenced her with a look rather than with his words. "When you calc'late to stack the deal agenst such scum as Conway, I'm playin' yore hand right through. But"—his tight grin brought understanding to his eyes—"when it pans out into a pink tea with these here St. Looie stage hands callin' the cards, why, I pass. There ain't no use protractin' things no longer, anyways, that I see."

Marion, too shrewd in intuition to surrender an atom of prestige in argument against the immutable verdict of her father's voice, registered her protest with one frigid glance.

"That's fine, Mr. Grover." Hedge stepped forward to the desk with a satisfaction that crowned long hours of suspense. His smile widened as he took the bag from Grover's hand, and widened farther as he scribbled a memorandum for it. "Of course that's temporary," he said.

Grover, bank president, hotel man, and monarch of the Prairie Grass, accepted the slip of paper with an air that stamped the transaction with finality, and as Hedge reached forth to pick up the bag from the broad expanse of his desk, Grover lifted it out of his hands and carried it across the room.

"Till morning," he said. "We'll put it here. Open up, Hedge." He stood patiently beside the old-fashioned safe while Hedge worked the lock and threw it open. He tossed in the bag and stood while the heavy door swung shut. Hedge arose from his knees with a sense of life renewed.

"And now," set forth Paley Grover, "the party's over. You can all go home."

He aimed his words so palpably at Fenton that the man could hardly have misunderstood him; and yet, as Mason and the men about him moved toward the door, the incorrigible delver into barren mines spoke with a voice which halted them by the sheer power of its inflections.

"You're missing the chance of your life!" he cried.

"Now what?" Grover glared at him irritably.

Fenton smiled at him with aggravating nonchalance.

"I told Miss Grover," he said "that to deliver the pay roll here securely was only half the work we had to do. The other half is to lay hold of Conway's person."

Grover lowered upon him.

"You won't do that with talk, young feller!" he rasped. "Men up here don't come to pink tea parties an' give theirselves up."

"No? I think you're mistaken." Fenton spoke very confidently. "Now listen to this. We've got your money here safe and sound. Well, you don't suppose Conway's going to swallow that, do you? He'll never stop short till that money is either paid off to the men or in his hands. That gives him until to-morrow noon, doesn't it."

Hedge sniffed loudly.

"It gave him till to-night!" he snapped. "That money sits in the safe until noon to-morrow, and the men come to that window in the cage for their money. There isn't any yeggman or bandit in the country can get into this cage without all of five hours' work with special tools. Conway lost his last chance when that bag passed through the steel door there."

He indicated the sliding door of meshed steel which guarded the cage that inclosed the office.

"Of course. But he'll come." Fenton made no secret of his supercilious regard for these men and their minds. "When he comes, let us say he fails to get in. All right. Then he'll go away, and we'll have to think of a new trick to deliver our pay roll next month." He observed with satisfaction the disconsolate shadow which passed across the faces before him. "But supposing he should come and find the steel door you brag about hadn't snapped

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shut? Suppose he came into this room without difficulty?"

"He won't!" sneered Hedge grimly.

"But suppose he did?" urged Fenton. "And then suppose that after he got in, while he was fooling about trying to find this money, or open the safe—supposing he discovered that we had been in here all the time, waiting for him? What would happen then?"

A pause followed—a momentous, impressive silence.

"By Heaven!" cried Grover. "We'd have him trapped!"

"You would!" agreed Fenton amiably. And because his plan was so simple, because to the hungry man hunters whom the bandit had so often tricked it offered such sure success, they agreed to accept Fenton's idea in spite of the fact that Marion seemed overwarm in congratulating him upon it

IX

You know there isn't much to the town of Clay City. All one can say for it is that it contains the Plunger, one of the richest properties of the Consolidated Mining Company, the operating offices of the company, the homes of the workers, and a few establishments which cater to these sons of toil. The offices of the company were at the corner of the only line of buildings which could claim the description of a city block. On the inside of it was the company store; the other three sides faced the unevenly open stretches of Clay City's streets. Opposite that side of the office building which contained its only door was the eating house of Gus Klemos.

This ramshackle edifice had long been closed to business at the moment when Fenton won his momentous decision, and it presented doors and windows that were black as moonless night and dead as dark. Yet it was to this inanimate restaurant that Bud Halliday had taken the protesting Michael Moon upon their arrival at Clay City, and there Stockbridge had joined them after a space.

Thus it happened that when Fenton had entered the company offices from a street he knew to be deserted, two pairs of eyes were watching him from that black, dead house across the way, and yet another pair of eyes were sharply registering his every movement from the blackness of the alleyway which concealed Stockbridge, who had gone to watch from another angle.

Having seen him enter, the watchers continued in their places. By an agreement with the well-known paymaster of the Consolidated Mines, they were awaiting the sound of a pistol shot which Bud Halliday himself was to fire.

Bud waited with an excitement in his heart which was not controllable. He felt almost physically sick with the conflicting doubts which came to him. If his signal was given too soon, the common sense, practical side of his nature told him that ridicule and failure might follow; if it were given too late, then surely all was lost. And Moon lent him poor company, for he had no inkling of what it was they waited for. Meantime, within that imprisoning cage Fenton had acted out his grand stand play and won his point. It is debatable whether even he knew how quickly the dénouement was to come. Bud first saw it in the approach of a short, slight man who, having apparently dismounted in an alley, came walking furtively, close to the structures which threw deep purple shadow across the sidewalk outside the chunky office building.

Moon, sitting at his ease in the window of the restaurant, leaned forward eagerly as he saw this wayfarer's approach, but Bud all but leaped through the window in his eager effort to follow the man's movements.

All unconscious of this scrutiny, the man opposite, having furtively examined the deserted streets, boldly approached the doorway of the office building and directly in front of it stood still. Bud watched him with strained eyes as he stood there, a grotesque figure of shadows and of nighttime, fumbling with something in his hand. Then he lifted his hands to his face, and Bud saw that the something which he fumbled was a dark bandanna handkerchief, and as they watched him the man adjusted that handkerchief across his eyes and face.

"Conway!" whispered Moon; and he tugged out his gun.

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"No," whispered Bud. "Wait!"

They waited and saw the man open the door of the office building and disappear from the purple shadowed streets.

As this wayfarer with the bandanna handkerchief disappeared from Bud Halliday's view he automatically appeared to the view of the little company within the cage. He appeared in the form of a silhouette, outlined against the violet background of the night. Then the door closed and he disappeared.

As the blackness regained its sway within the room, Marion suppressed a gasp of overwhelming excitement and of doubt. She knew; she felt sure she knew; and yet, supposing something went wrong?

Suppose the superb self-confidence of Fenton failed him in the crucial moment! Suppose there was gunplay! Fighting! She had brought her father into this. Suppose he, in his splendid spirit of a bygone age, should fight!

She was filled with doubt and fear as she heard the gate click. The intruder had entered the cage.

Then: "Stick up your hands! The game is up!"

It was the superb, icy cool voice of Fenton; and swiftly the light went up.

She saw a slight figure, a man with a blue handkerchief across his eyes. He had advanced to the desk where the lamp was, and for an instant laid down his gun, intent upon lighting the lamp. It must have been at that instant that Fenton had slipped upon him from behind, covered him, caught him red handed, and himself turned up the lamp which had not been totally extinguished.

Fenton looked very fine, impressively commanding as he stood there controlling the situation, and Marion could not withhold her admiration. For that matter, neither could the men who leaped forth from all corners of the stage, their weapons alert to exact from the intruder the uttermost penalty should he resist.

But he did not resist. When Fenton whipped his gun from the table and the handkerchief from his eyes, the intruder only smiled. Then Fenton turned to the company behind him.

"Put up your guns, gentlemen," he said, as he poked the unmasked bandit lightly in the ribs with his weapon. "I think I have him in control."

There was an instant then when the muzzle of every gun wavered and dropped. In that instant Fenton had magically changed. After the manner of a protean actor, he took upon himself a voice of steel and he leveled the two guns which he held in two unwavering hands. He leveled them upon Grover, Mason, Hedge, and all their men.

"Stick up your hands, gentlemen!" he ordered. "Quick!" And because of the metallic tinkle of his voice they obeyed, knowing what he meant.

"Drop those guns!"

Grover cursed vividly, but his gun dropped to the floor, and every other gun save Fenton's followed it. No man there needed prompting before the clangor of that voice.

"You're Conway?" rumbled Grover.

"Black Conway," grinned Fenton. "Jimmy, pick up those guns."

The intruder, now identified, coolly made his rounds, and under the muzzle of Fenton's weapon collected all the weapons that had been dropped. Moreover, he searched the fuming guardians of the pay roll.

"Now take him over and get into that safe," directed Fenton. He indicated Hedge with the barrel of one gun; and Jimmy, armed with pockets bulging and a gun in each hand, urged the superintendent toward the safe.

"I know him!" swore old Grover, as he watched the apt Jimmy make Hedge work fast upon the combination. "He works at Harker's livery."

"Sure," smiled Fenton. "But don't make all that noise again. You look prettier when you're silent." Then after a pause he made conversation for them, but held it strictly one sided by dint of a waving gun in the direction of any mouth that opened.

"Jim's been a great help," he explained. "It was hard to keep posted 'way out there at the old Peabody Mine." Then, again: "Maybe you recognize the voice I'm using now. It's my own. That was a hard bit, changing around my voice. Hurry up, Jim."

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Then he turned to Marion. "I sure like your smile, sis," he said approvingly. "It ain't often women are such sports. You are too good for that weak kid Halliday. I'm mighty sorry I had to play you for a fool."

"Don't mention it, Mr. Fenton," replied the girl sweetly, and it was notable that he made no move to interrupt her. "Not yet," she added. And with that, Jimmy, grabbing the saddlebag from the safe, returned Hedge to his place and leaped to Fenton's side.

"All right, Jim. Cover 'em, please!" ordered Fenton.

Taking the bag from Jim, he permitted that efficient individual to cover the company with two guns while he himself withdrew through the gate. In a moment he reappeared at a window, the glass of which he knocked out to permit him to introduce his weapons through the gap.

"If you all keep your hands strictly in the air," he said, with the voice of a side show man, "Jimmy will now say good night. Say good night, Jimmy."

"Good night," said Jimmy, and he withdrew through the gate, which they heard click to and lock, with the dread knowledge that it could only be opened from the outside with a key in Hedge's pocket.

"Don't try and telephone," advised Fenton kindly. "The wires are cut." And with a smile of ineffable friendliness he disappeared from the window.

A certain silence filled the cage from which he had departed. It was broken by a burble of sound from Marion. Her father sprang to her side.

"Marion!" he cried. "Sis, don't take it thataway."

"Don't, dad!" she burbled. "Don't. I can't help laughing! I can't help it!"

"Laughing!" roared Paley Grover.

"Twenty thousand dollars! And you're responsible for it! P'r'aps you can laugh that off!" screamed Hedge.

"I can!" she cried. "That money's in the bank at Prairie Grass! I switched them while you spoke with Sanville at the bank. Fenton has run away with three pounds of newspaper."

"Newspaper!" An incredulous chorus.

"Yes. I knew it was he from the first. I knew it. By his talk and his ways. He talked nothing but Conway. He was so conceited. I knew it. I can't tell you how I knew it, but I did. What's that?"

They stood transfixed about her, moved beyond words and bewildered beyond thought, as they heard the sound of gunfire on the street.

"That" was Bud Halliday, Michael Moon and Stockbridge, fighting it out with Fenton and his Jim as they struggled to release their horses in the alley behind Klemos's eating house.

X.

AFTER the magnificent Fenton and his confederate surrendered—for Fenton's sense of humor, it seemed, prohibited gun play—Michael Moon released the prisoners from their cage of steel with his own private key.

Paley Grover was submerged instantly with his ancient crony Moon, in a consideration of the appalling fantasy with which this modern criminal had cluttered up his career. They were not lacking in admiration for Bud Halliday and, for Grover's part, an honest pride in the achievement of his daughter. But they were chiefly engrossed in a review of the occurrences which had led to the dénouement, and a mutual regret for more manly, more straightforward and, one gathered, more sanguinary days that were gone forever from the West.

Not that this worried Bud Halliday. Both Grover and old Moon had assured him by their words, their attitude and the timbre of their voices, that if a man of this effete generation must be relied upon for the troublous affairs of life, Bud Halliday was the man they would put their trust in.

In short, Bud Halliday knew that in the consideration of these two old-timers he was first choice now either for the job in hand or for the more delicate position of, say, son-in-law. Further than that, their conversation did not interest him. He found a more congenial soul in Marion.

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He had no need to seek her out, for she had come to him as soon as old Moon's key released her.

She was passionately anxious regarding those shots.

"It was a signal," he explained, finding it hard to convince her that he was unscathed. "I fired so that Stockbridge would close in."

"You were waiting for him?" she cried, amazed.

"Shore," grinned Bud. He drew from his pocket that which he had found fluttering on the ground near the Peabody mine. "When I went out to tell Fenton just what I thought about him, I found these in the dump behind his shack," he explained.

And in the strong circle of his arm she could with difficulty make out the scraps of blue bandanna handkerchief which had so obviously been cut away to make two eyelets in a mask.

THE END

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SEARCH

DISSATISFACTION lit my soul
And sent it out to find
Some one, or thing, or place, or time—
Untutored, crude and blind!
Barbaric music caught its ear
With rending, throbbing clashes
As fevered kisses smothered songs
In little, colored splashes!
It fascinated for a while
But didn't satisfy—
So further surged we on, in search,
My eager soul and I!
Cross grumbling bridges that complained,
And looping roads that drop
Down cedar-clad, immobile hills,
We followed, but to stop.
The fluttering winds and pungent earth
Lent much of wisdom's lore,
But something in my soul refused
To think there was no more!
I watched the bees and butterflies,
And said "Aha! We'll dance!"
But in fatigue, I laughed and cried,
"It's further on, perchance!"
So delved we in philosophy
To find a certain peace,
Excepting that my soul, averse,
Kept urging, without cease!
To music's power, I turned in hope
Of what it meant and taught,
But though it soothed and comforted,
It wasn't what I sought!
And then *you* came, while tremblingly
I weighed your words and ways,
Aware that I had found a clew
To my perplexing maze!
I do not count the joy or pain;
I take you as you are!
The search is ended—nothing now
Can constitute a bar!
A little fun—a little love—
Some one to love and care!
Perhaps my search was not unique.
It's happening everywhere!

Sonia Ruthèle Novák Clary.

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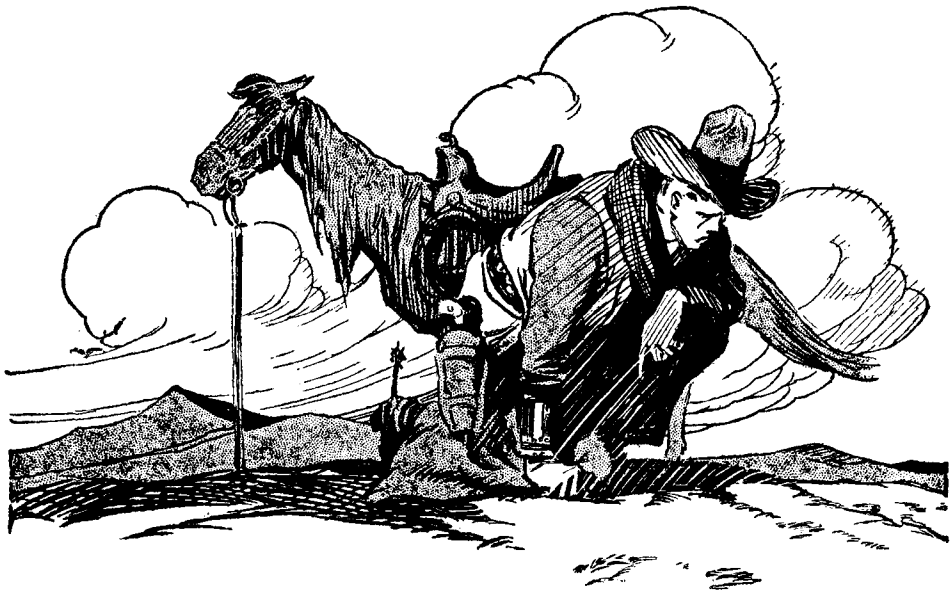

Hopalong Cassidy's Pal

By CLARENCE E. MULFORD

Author of "The Coming of Cassidy," "Hopalong Cassidy Returns," etc.

VII—ON THE TRAIL OF A FOX

MESQUITE JENKINS, deputy sheriff of Twin River County, and miles away from his jurisdiction, sat on his horse on the top of a little divide in a mountain park, watching two thin columns of smoke climbing heavenward against the fresh greenery of the distant mountains. His friends were carrying out his ideas, and with their smoke columns marked the entrances to two passes from the parklike valley.

In all there were four of these natural exits which could be easily seen; how many more ways out of the valley there were he did not know. Red Connors and Lanky Smith by their fires had marked the two passes they would not stay and guard, for they would ride on and hide themselves at the entrances of the other two, putting their trust in smoke. In that mountain park was a band of fugitives, or what remained of it, wanted for the attempted assassination, from ambush, of Hopalong Cassidy; and for other crimes.

Mesquite was on the trail of a single member of the band, an old fox called Shanghai. He had, earlier in the game, captured Shanghai; but had been tricked and overpowered, and lost him. Only a few hours before he had thought himself

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to be hot on the trail of the old reprobate, but had been tricked again. Shanghai had left his companion to pay the price of his own escape, and, to make matters worse, had shot him instead of the deputy. Then he had left a faint streamer of dust to thin out in the air, and continued his flight.

Mesquite turned from contemplation of the smoke columns, wheeled his horse, and pushed westward to find the tracks of the cunning fugitive, and to stick to them to a showdown. He located them easily, read that the fugitive was pressing his horse and depending on speed; and, risking a shot from ambush, the deputy followed, at times circling around clumps of brush and other cover which might contain a marksman.

All that day he followed, studying not so much the tracks before his eyes as the general lay of the country; and every point was referred by him to the location of Split Top Mountain, which he believed to be the principal point of rendezvous. When twilight deepened and made him reluctantly cease his trailing, he found a deep ravine where the light of his fire would not show, cooked a hurried supper, put out the fire, and rode a mile farther through the darkness before he was satisfied to picket the horse and roll up in his blankets. Dawn found him stamping out the breakfast fire, and the first rays of the sun warmed his back as he rode once more along the trail he was following.

The forest growth grew steadily sparser, and the country was becoming more and more broken by steep, low hills. He noticed that the trail was bearing steadily toward the south, gradually describing a circle; and more than that, it was taking on a peculiar characteristic.

It led him time after time along the end of a ridge, to swing sharply up the farther side until within a few yards of the summit; here it ran level for varying distances, then went down again, across the flats, and repeated the whole thing at the next ridge or hill. The tracks still indicated that the maker was pushing rapidly on, except where they led under the tops of the sheltering ridges; and there the fugitive had slowed, and in some places had stopped altogether.

Mesquite grinned, and then laughed aloud at the significance of this. He was not old in years, but he was richly endowed with the lore of the plainsman, thanks to the teachings of his father and to his own love for the study. He could picture the fugitive, doubling back to his friends, or to some agreed-upon rendezvous, working out this phase of his trail; he could see the old fox streaking across the low-lying level stretches toward the upper end of the next ridge or hill, around this, up the farther slope, and slowing as he neared the top.

He could picture Shanghai riding hatless under the summit, now and then standing up in his stirrups to peer over it for a glimpse of his back trail; and occasionally checking his horse for a more careful study of the country he had just passed over. The fox was getting ready to play the rôle of a more combative animal, to strike unexpectedly against the persistent follower.

Mesquite enjoyed this phase of the game and rode on at the same steady lope; but he was careful to estimate distance in the terms of rifle-range, and not to pass or approach the ridges too closely.

Imagination is a great gift, bestowing riches on its owner. With nothing to think about except that little matter of distance and the plain tracks before him, Mesquite put himself in the place of the fugitive.

The constant repetition of this common trail trick was calculated to put a man's mind in one groove, to center thought on the menace of the trick itself, and to make a pursuer careless, in time, of other things. It plainly indicated one danger and tended to discount caution in other perils. Mesquite, enjoying his rôle as pursuer, found more enjoyment in assuming the rôle of the pursued, and cast about in his mind for ways to baffle pursuit, or to render it deadly.

Suddenly he was struck by a thought that made him pull up involuntarily, scan the comparatively level plain between two ridges, and freeze from the intensity of his thoughts. For several moments he sat rigid in his saddle and then, with a profane ejaculation, turned abruptly from the innocent-looking trail to ride at right angles to it, along the front of the next ridge.

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He had remembered, and given full force and credit to, certain signs which had made him smile when he had looked upon them; at several places, high up under the summit of a ridge, Shanghai had left his horse, crept on hands and knees to the top, and lay barely under the apex, the sign of his rifle plain in the dust.

Why had this commonplace action of a cautious and hunted man made Mesquite react to it so strangely? It was only the sign of a hunted fugitive looking back along his trail in hope of a shot at his pursuer; but to an imaginative mind it was more than that.

In the first place there was no real need for it; a tenderfoot, or a man pursued for the first time, might be urged to do it from sheer overcaution or from timidity arising out of his own inexperience; but this was not Shanghai's first flight, and neither was he inexperienced. He had not been a tenderfoot for forty years, and it was doubtful it he ever had been.

He had fled at speed, which his trail plainly showed; he had made no attempt to mask it, to double and turn, to seek out hard ground or to follow running water; there the line of tracks lay, plain to the most amateurish eyes; and yet, he had wasted time in slow riding behind the ridge tops and in leaving his horse in order to climb the steep slopes on foot.

At the first of these significant signs Mesquite had found two cigarette butts, indicating that some time had been spent there by the man who was showing a trail which otherwise indicated almost a panicky flight. Furthermore, Shanghai's reputation was that of a man who never stood and fought while he could escape. The coming of night had permitted him to ride on and put additional miles between himself and his pursuer, who had to stop and wait for daylight to show the trail again; and he had ridden on for several hours before dismounting and picketing his horse to graze in a rich patch of bunchgrass.

Mesquite laughed aloud again, and there came to him some of that grudged admiration which Hopalong and the others felt for the old fox. At the thought of that word "old" Mesquite's eyes danced; the old fox knew that he was being followed by a mere youth, and in most cases youth is synonymous with ignorance and recklessness.

Plainly marking out a class of danger spots, and emphasizing them by the dumb show of lying in wait, Shanghai was preparing the mind of his pursuer to discount the real danger, the hidden danger of the innocent flats between the hills, where an occasional dry wash cut across like a well designed rifle trench, and afforded excellent cover for a marksman.

Having by this time roughly estimated the trend of the fugitive's course, and bearing in mind the position of Split Top Mountain, Mesquite left the trail and struck due south on a route calculated to make a chord across the arc of Shanghai's riding. While he still remembered to keep a long rifle range away from the ridges, bowlders and other possible cover, he pushed his horse at speed, safe for the while, since any ambush would be sprung along the actual trail.

For a little while this would be true; after that he would have to use more caution, in case the pursued had marked his change of direction, and attempted to make use of it. To outguess a fox is an achievement which even another fox may take a pardonable pride in.

Noon came and passed, and the miles behind Mesquite had assumed a sizable total. Knowing approximately how many hours the fugitive had been ahead of him when he had left the trail, Mesquite felt that he was nearly even with the other; but to strengthen his assurance, he pressed on until mid-afternoon, and then struck straight toward the west to relocate the tracks or, failing in this, to learn that he was ahead of the maker of them.

He followed his new course until nightfall without sight of anything which told of Shanghai's passing, and he built his supper fire in the sharp bend of a deep dry wash, whose perpendicular banks at this point, harder in structure than those above or below, made a miniature cañon which would shut out all reflection of the little fire, while the overhang of the shale wall masked it from above. Again he kicked apart the embers and rode on until darkness assured

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him that he was safe from tracking, and then he hobbled his horse and turned it loose to graze over a wide area of grass.

Sunrise found him in the saddle again and riding on; but it also found him tricked, although he did not know it.

II.

SHANGHAI'S reputation was truly founded. He was a fox and not a wolf. The persistence of his pursuer indicated the character of that person sufficiently well to give the fugitive a basis for appraising him; and Mesquite's youth suggested adolescent carelessness. To be certain of the latter and more fully to measure Mesquite's capacity for thinking, Shanghai had laid his trail from ridge to ridge, and made those signs which the deputy had found so enlightening.

Time after time the fugitive, from the vantage point of another ridge, had looked back to see the pursuer sticking stubbornly to his trail; and he almost had given up the hope that his new plan would work, when his efforts were rewarded. At last his threats of ambush had been taken for their face value; at last Mesquite had heeded them and used his head as an old hand at trailing would have used it.

The steady swing of the trail around a great circle and the location of the fugitive's friends united to indicate that its maker was trying to rejoin his party; the high and screened watch points on every hill and ridge had conveyed their empty warnings; and reading the signs aright, according to the data presented, the deputy had drawn the natural conclusions; but the conclusions were wrong because the signs had been made to deceive.

Shanghai was not trying to create carelessness which would discount the possibility of danger in innocently appearing surroundings; he was not trying to work back to his friends through such a wide circle; but he was trying to create the suspicion of danger, and the natural inference to be drawn from the direction of his flight. In no other way could he throw the pursuer off his trail long enough for him to put a great distance between them.

Watching from another ridge, Shanghai caught sight of the moving speck which he knew was Mesquite Jenkins; and he chuckled with delight when he saw his pursuer at last forsake the trail and its threat, and strike straight across country to intercept the great circle at a point many miles away. This, he recognized, was no accidental choice; and this, he also recognized, proved that the youth was an expert trailer, despite his years.

Only the amateurs stuck stubbornly to the tracks themselves; the adept, drawing conclusions based on experience, would dare to leave the actual sign and save time and danger by striking across the windings to pick it up again miles farther on. In no other way could a pursuer hope to overtake a fugitive, for the latter could make the signs much faster than a follower could find and read them.

Knowing the caliber of the pursuer, Shanghai knew what to expect in a given circumstance. The swordsman fears an expert less than he does a novice, for no one may hope to guess what asinine thing a novice or a fool will attempt.

His doubts cleared up as to the skill of the tracker, Shanghai put back the cigarette paper with which he was about to manufacture more misleading evidence, and with great satisfaction loaded his old pipe for a really satisfying smoke. He lay at ease behind the rim of the ridge, pleasantly watching the speck move straight southward, and from time to time he chuckled as he saw the speck detour to avoid a dry-wash or some other break in the floorlike level of the plain.

He was in no great hurry now, for now he had time in which to get away; but it would not do to waste too much of it. He gave Mesquite full credit for his skill, and idly wondered how it was that a man of so few years could have become so expert in an art so difficult; and he wondered how soon that expertness would learn of the trick, and how it would react to the knowledge.

The old man put himself in the youth's place, and found that there were two things to choose between when that knowledge came. He either would ride back on his own trail, at the consequent cost of much

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time lost, or he would strike north and west in hope of finding the trail of the fugitive farther along, in which case the time lost would not amount to so much.

Undecided in this, Shanghai slid down the slope a few yards, arose, mounted and rode north, thereby making his trail describe a sharp and narrow angle and one that could not be picked up in case Mesquite chose a northwest course. Of course, later Mesquite would realize that he had been tricked and start a circle of his own, but by that time it would be too late.

Shanghai reluctantly admitted that this youth was forcing him to draw heavily on his years of experience; that he had to plan hours ahead and overlook no possibility. Night found him the gainer by a full day's ride, and he camped early to permit his horse to make up for some of the poor grazing it had had. In such country the grass did not grow thickly, and the radius of the picket rope would not compensate for the energy used up during the day.

A very large part of the grazing time was spent in moving about in search of grass, and even a hobbled animal, able to cover more ground than one circumscribed by a picket rope, might feed inadequately. On this part of the mountain park the earth was semidesert, and while the grass was famous for its nutriment it was very sparse.

III.

MESQUITE, bearing in mind the general trend of the trail-circle, had passed the point where he had expected to cut it again; and suspicion grew swiftly. Would Shanghai voluntarily return to his friends, now that he had managed to get away from the storm center of danger?

Convinced that he was wasting time on a fool's chase, he had one of three alternatives: to abandon the trail as now lost and of small value because of the time wasted; to follow his own tracks back to where he had turned aside, which would result in more lost time; or to gamble in an attempt to pick up the signs to the northward. In this case it did not so much matter if he abandoned the trail, for the reason that he could ride back and pursue others of the band, and obtain a prisoner or a victim from the rest of the crowd; and if he stuck to this present pursuit he might not only fail in it, but be unable later on to overtake any of the others.

The cleverness of Shanghai's stratagem struck him with sudden force and sent a little wave of cold anger through him; he could imagine the old fox cackling in derision; and he swung his horse toward the northwest, determined to renew the chase. If he failed in it he might force the fugitive into the range of Red's or Lanky's riding.

All day he rode, stopping only when he came to massed grass so that his mount could, in half an hour, obtain an amount of food which would require three times as long to pick up under ordinary conditions. Darkness found him moving with no thought of camping, and he pushed on until after dawn without stopping except to rest his horse.

He was certain that he had not yet reached a locality where he might expect to find the trail. Coming to another patch of heavy grass in a damp depression of the plain, he picketed the horse and cooked himself a breakfast over stems of sage and small brush, and then went on again.

At noon he climbed a steep, high ridge and scanned the country on three sides of him, and was turning away in disappointment when an infinitesimal moving speck caught his eye. It was a bird hastily climbing almost straight up in the air. Such a flight bespoke fright, and Mesquite, hoping anew, ran and stumbled down the ridge, vaulted into the saddle and struck out on a lope straight for the scene of the hawk's possible discomfiture.

Shanghai, riding down the smooth floor of a deep dry-wash, the sounds of his horse's hoofs lost in the fine, soft sand, turned a sharp bend and blundered upon a hawk feeding on a jack rabbit. The bird, enraged by this sudden intrusion, showed signs of fight for an instant, and then, leaving its prey, launched itself into the air as straight up as it could, frantically trying to escape the threat of Shanghai's drawn gun glinting in the sunlight.

Shanghai regretfully holstered the weapon, his trigger finger withheld by a sub-

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conscious dislike for the noise of the report. There was no telling who might be within hearing of a gunshot, and now that he was almost safe it would be folly to make a mistake.

His face crinkled with anger at the bird's momentary show of fight, and he cursed it malignantly as it climbed out of range. His anger over so small a thing was remarkably savage, as though he recognized in the bird's pugnacity a knowledge and acceptance of his own reputation for timidity, a reputation which did him an injustice. He shook a fist heavenward at a soaring speck, and then grinned maliciously.

"Jest for that you lose yore grub!" he snarled, and dismounted. When he rode on again he had the rabbit fastened to his saddle, and found a little satisfaction in his revenge.

Mesquite, pushing his horse as hard as he dared, staked its usefulness on this gambler's choice. Had the hawk been surprised by a coyote it would not have launched itself into such a panicky flight; it would have flown aside, just out of reach, not willing wholly to abandon its prey to a petty, four-footed coward; and while he debated this matter he turned the end of a ridge and drew rein on the bank of a dry-wash, along the bottom of which lay the very familiar tracks of a horse.

Laughing quietly, he sought for and found a way down to the bottom, and pushed on with renewed eagerness. He had no ambush to fear now, for the man he was crowding so closely had no suspicion of his danger.

IV.

SHANGHAI followed up the dry-wash until it gradually became effected on the upper part of the little water shed; he crossed the ridge and rode straight down the slope toward another infant wash, along this until its walls reached above his head, and then turned up a branch wash toward the south, crossed another dividing ridge and drew rein as he came to the tracks of a horse, which he studied closely. Nodding suddenly, he followed the tracks toward and into a wide hollow well covered with brush and stunted trees, and laughed at the startled exclamation of the man who had been bending over a small fire.

"Hello, Arizony," said Shanghai affably, as he swung down from the saddle, and started on foot up a steep place in the bank of the hollow. The habitual caution in this movement did not surprise Arizona, for his companion's habits were well known to him.

"Where th' hell did you an' Hoskins go to?" demanded Arizona in obvious anger.

Arizona was in no sweet temper, having just been chased for two days by Lanky Smith and only escaping during the night just past. He remembered vividly that Shanghai and Hoskins had been delegated to lay a plain trail to and through an ambush for the Double-Y punchers to follow; and that the trail had not been laid. The ambushers had waited three times as long as they had had any business to, and then scattered; and Arizona had been unfortunate enough to try to leave the mountain park by one of the passes to the north, where Lanky Smith had been quietly on guard.

Shanghai had been searching the plain from his elevated position and had seen a faint streamer of dust on his back trail, and his mind was racing for a means of escape from the threatened danger as he made his way down the steep bank.

"We started, all right," he explained, glancing at his horse.

This animal long had been coveted by his present companion, and was fresher by far than the horse which had led Lanky so swift and long a chase. Arizona's mount was almost a wreck from hard running and insufficient food. "Them damn punchers blundered onto our trail, cut us off from th' way we was figgerin' to ride, killed Hoskins, an' one of 'em has been chasin' me ever since. Throwed him off yesterday an' made a fool out of him. Now I can take things easy for a while, an' rest my cayuse. That there roan's a wonder: look how fresh it is after all it's done. Where are th' boys goin' to meet agin?"

It took all Arizona's will power to keep from staring at Shanghai's big roan, and the glances he gave it were full of avarice, which Shanghai recognized without appearing to. Arizona's own horse was well used

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up, and never had been any too good; and he was not as certain as he might have been that Lanky definitely had lost his trail, but he was pretty sure that Shanghai's pursuer had been well shaken off; Shanghai's cunning was assurance as to that.

Arizona had no love for Shanghai, and strongly doubted the reason for that person not having gone through with the plan that he himself had outlined for the ambushing of the pursuing punchers. He suspected that Shanghai and Hoskins had left their hard-pressed friends as a bait to check pursuit and to clear a way for themselves; and he suspected the truth.

"So they killed Hoskins, huh?" he said, scowling to mask any telltale sign of the plan forming in his head. "Who was they?" he added curiously, hoping to trap the old fox into a lie.

"One of 'em was that Mesquite cub," innocently answered Shanghai, becoming a little nervous by the way time was passing.

That little dust streamer in the west was bothering him, for it would be growing rapidly plainer. He flashed another glance at his companion's horse, and it required no second sight to tell him why the animal had been run so hard. One of the persistent three had been keeping Arizona on the jump; and Shanghai had no way of knowing the identity of this pursuer.

However, Arizona's ease of mind was plainly revealed by the placidity of his actions and demeanor: he undoubtedly had thrown the pursuer off his trail and now felt safe again. This was much more than Shanghai had done, despite his words.

"Why, I didn't get sight of th' other feller," he said. "Might 'a' been Connors or it might 'a' been Smith." He chuckled softly. "Well, it's a good thing we both can ease up a little. That cayuse of yourn looks like hell, an' a good rest an' feedin' won't hurt it. It never was much good."

Arizona grunted something and tried to hide his determination. His plan had been completed. With a comparatively fresh horse, and almost any animal would have been comparatively fresh in contrast with his own, and with Lanky Smith somewhere to the north and circling like a damned hound in search of the trail he had lost, Arizona's peace of mind would be greatly improved by leaving Shanghai a worn-out animal and this pleasant little camp fire.

He arose awkwardly, lost his balance for a moment, and managed to knock over the coffeepot while he struggled to regain his equilibrium.

"Darn my clumsy feet!" he growled, kicking at the pot and missing it in his simulated rage. "If you want any coffee, fill that damn thing an' get back here *pronto!*"

"Shouldn't lose yore temper over a little thing like that," said Shanghai, pleasantly, and in no way showing that he saw through his companion's strategy. His confidence in the other's fairness was childlike and one could see that he was thinking only of the coffee.

He picked up the pot and started for the hillside fault, where water percolated through strata of rotten stone and collected in a little pool on a ledge before trickling down the rocks to be blotted out by the sand at their base. The spring advertised its location by the vivid greenery about it and the old fox needed no directions for its finding.

Reaching the spot he bent over to fill the pot without disturbing the sediment of the little pool, then glanced swiftly back toward the camp in time to see Arizona, lying low on the far side of the big roan, dash from sight into the brush and stunted timber. Smothering a chuckle, Shanghai threw the pot from him and ran at top speed toward the remaining animal, flung himself into the saddle, rode swiftly up the little divide and grinned at the tenuous dust cloud moving swiftly along the trail he had made. Wheeling, he pushed the horse over a long stretch of rocky ground, exultantly glad that it was unshod, and in a few minutes he had lost himself from the sight of any one who might ride over the top of the ridge.

Using every trick he knew, he bent all his energies to masking his trail, and in this he was helped by the nature of the ground. When a mile from the camp he left his picketed mount and circled back to his trail on foot and crouched behind a bowlder, his rifle in his hands.

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He was glad that Arizona had taken time to change the weapons in the saddle scabbards before he swapped horses, for the calibers and makes were different, and it would have been serious to be short of rifle ammunition. While he waited behind the bowlder to stop a pursuit which he felt was more than unlikely, he wondered how it was that Mesquite had been able to find his trail and to make up so much of the lost time; and then he gently laid the rifle down, folded his skinny arms across his lean stomach, and rocked to and fro in convulsive and silent mirth.

An amateur tracker would not know one set of horse tracks from another; but the trail hound who had followed and outguessed him was not an amateur, and could be counted on to make such nice discriminations.

"Damned if it ain't worth losin' th' roan," he chuckled when the peak of his mirth had passed. "Arizony shore swallowed th' hull thing plumb entire. Swapped his wore-out cayuse for a good cayuse; but he don't know for what else! He's plumb welcome to th' roan, an' what goes with it; an' I'm aimin' to get out of this damn country jest as fast as that crow bait will take me. Give it a day to rest up an' feed, an' it 'll near be a good cayuse. Whoever was chasin' Arizony ain't botherin' me very much; I'd rather have Smith or Connors after me any day than that cold-faced trail hound of a Mesquite."

V.

MESQUITE rode cautiously up the far slope of the little divide, scrutinized the peaceful scene below him and considered the gently burning fire. The tracks he had been following so long ran down the slope, sloped themselves on rocky ground, and reappeared in the sand and gravel near the fire. Other tracks showed there, and from that distance he confused them.

This looked entirely too peaceable to suit him, this little hollow, with its brush and small timber; and the burning fire fairly shrieked a warning. Realizing that he was in rifle range of the camp fire, he backed swiftly down the far slope and rode south along the ridge; and to his surprise he saw the tracks of a horse across a sandy opening in the brush. They went on in a line as straight as the nature of the ground would permit, and a nearer approach to them told him that they had been made by a hard running animal.

He crossed the ridge when he thought that such a move was safe, and rode up to the tracks. He swore aloud with exultation: Shanghai was not as far ahead now as he had been earlier in the day, and somehow the old fox had learned that the pursuit had again become hard and close.

Mesquite did not hesitate. The opportunity offered by the fire and camp site to acquire a bit of knowledge and perhaps to trail another of the band and one who could be safely counted on to give him far less trouble than the man he had followed for so many miles, did not tempt him. He wanted Shanghai, and now it looked as though his want would be satisfied.

He followed the trail doggedly, here and there cutting across the windings when he could see the tracks at the other end; and soon he realized that the fleeing man was reducing the speed of his riding, as though somewhat assured that pursuit had slackened. This gave him food for thought, and it made him more alert.

He began to waste time now, in reverting to a former method of procedure, for he rode around all suspicious looking covers. He had had a taste of Shanghai's marksmanship a few days before, and could find no fault with it.

Twilight found him still pursuing his tactics of caution, and darkness made him give up his trailing for the day. He picketed his horse and made a camp, but before he set fire to the little pile of dry twigs and small branches for the cooking of his supper he scouted around in the brush and up to the top of a small hill close by.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked again. A soft glow, so faint as to make him doubt his vision, was discernible far to the south. Shanghai would not do a thing like that; and yet, his slowing pace had suggested that Shanghai once more felt secure from pursuit, but that might be explained by the fatigue of his horse.

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Baffled in finding a positive explanation for that careless fire, Mesquite became suspicious of it. He hastened back to his own camp, forsook it, and rode on a roundabout course well to the left and beyond it. He did not purpose to be surprised in the night, or wake up at dawn to find his horse missing and himself afoot in the wilderness. At last assured that he dared to leave the animal without fear of its theft, he picketed it again and made his way on foot toward the telltale glow, his senses alert, and ready for anything.

By the time this suspicious fire had died down to a degree which masked the blaze he was not far from it, and he went forward unerringly. After a cautious reconnoissance which would have reflected credit to an old-time Indian, he came to the gully he had been searching for. One bank, the farther, was high and steep, of that characteristic light gray color of the clays of that country.

On the almost flat bank across from it a few glowing embers pulsed into incandescence under the urging of a faint and fitful breeze; and near the dying fire a blanket-rolled figure lay immobile, barely to be seen in the increasing darkness around the incandescent ashes. The bulky object at the end farthest from the embers had the general outlines of a saddle.

Mesquite froze against his bowlder, crouching even lower. The inference was entirely too plain; and to his mind there came keen recollection of dummy figures which he himself had manufactured to place around a camp fire not a week before. A hunted fool might sleep beside his cooking fire; but by no stretch of imagination could he picture old Shanghai doing this, after leaving a plain trail for half a day.

Silently moving back the way he had come, Mesquite listened for one telltale sound, the sound which would indicate if this was a true night camp. If it was, then the horse would be picketed somewhere near it; and no horse grazes without making a characteristic cropping noise as it cuts off the grass.

Waiting with a patience foreign to most white men, Mesquite let the minutes pass without stirring, his ears straining to catch sounds of life. An hour went by without hearing a thing that told him anything, and in that silence the grazing of a horse would have been heard for many feet. This camp was a blind, the figure was a dummy, and somewhere the fugitive was sleeping peacefully; or he was waiting within a few yards of that dying fire to shoot the man who might investigate it.

If he was sleeping somewhere else why had he taken the trouble to roll up a dummy figure and leave it there? In such a case a bait were useless; and in this altitude a man did not part with his blankets to make up a dummy for the fun of it.

VI.

It has been said that patience is a virtue; but on the plains it was a necessity as well. The maker of that camp had it in measure, but not in full measure. Dawn was near when he crept from his place of concealment, satisfied that Shanghai had not followed him, and anxious to make the most of the coming daylight hours for his escape from the valley.

He circled the camp for safety's sake, and then made his way toward the dummy and the ashes of the fire, laughing softly at the trick he had played on the old fox. Considering the pace he had set the day before, and the condition of the animal he had left for Shanghai to use, he need have no further fear of that person. He would cook his breakfast, get his horse and go on again; and by nightfall he should be in a safe locality, far beyond reach of the Double-Y punchers.

It took Arizona only a few minutes to gather dried wood for the fire; and from under the saddle, serving as a pillow for the dummy figure made up by the blanket, he drew forth his scanty rations. Partly filling the coffeepot from his canteen he made the mixture, placed the pot on the fire and squatted down to roll a cigarette.

As he reached toward the fire for an ember he froze momentarily in a vast surprise, and for the moment forgot both ember and breakfast. Coming along the wash, not fifty paces from him, was a young man whose progress was unhurried and steady. The first flush of daylight revealed a nick-

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eled badge fastened askew to the tightly buttoned coat, and showed the soft gleam of steel above the holsters jogging with each deliberate step.

Arizona sucked in his breath, doubting his eyes; and for an instant the two men stared at each other in strong disbelief. The badge-wearing newcomer should have been Shanghai; the man squatting at the fire should have been Shanghai; and since neither was Shanghai, where was that person?

Mesquite smiled coldly and spoke, but he did not check his slow steps. He was greatly puzzled by this amazing change of identity and the miraculous disappearance of the man he had trailed for so many miles; but he easily shelved the puzzle and thankfully accepted what had been given to him. His long chase had not been fruitless, and he would get Shanghai some other day.

"Want you, Arizony," he said, crisply; "in th' name of th' law," he added, somewhat apologetically. He never before had arrested a man, and he felt a little self-conscious. It would have been so very much simpler to leave off the explanatory phrase, and start shooting.

Arizona was now on his feet, still incredulous, but balanced and slightly crouched. Had this newcomer been Shanghai he would not have been much surprised; had he been Lanky Smith it would have been understandable; but that it was Mesquite Jenkins passed all belief.

Cold anger accompanied the only solution possible: Shanghai had tricked him. All right: for that he would kill Shanghai at the first opportunity. Meanwhile the fact of the present situation had to be accepted at face value. He raised a warning hand.

"I can hear you from there," he said. "What th' hell you want me for?"

"For shootin' Hopalong Cassidy!" snapped Mesquite, still advancing. "Stick 'em up, if you wants; it'll suit me better if you don't. So far I ain't took no prisoners, an' I ain't hankerin' to begin with you." The deputy now stopped hopefully, his cold eyes gleaming.

"How'n hell did you ever get on my trail?" demanded Arizona, hoping to clear up this matter without a remaining doubt. Besides, any such discussion would serve to kill time and give him a chance to use his wits.

His mind was racing, taking in many things at top speed. He saw the two guns hanging from the wide and sagging belts; he thought of the rage of Hopalong Cassidy's friends, and he doubted that he would be given a fair trial if he surrendered. If he went back to Twin River it would be to face a lynching.

Of this youngster he had heard disturbing rumors, but rumors often were grossly exaggerated; and now the deputy was not with his two able companions in arms. If he surrendered he would be lynched; if he fought it out here and now while he had something to fight with he might win his freedom.

There was great danger in an even break with this cold bloodhound; there was certain death if he gave in to the officer's demand; and if he were lucky he might outwit this youth, who was only half his own age.

"I didn't shoot Cassidy; but I ain't expectin' you to believe it," he said, smiling a little. "Suppose we eat breakfast, an' then talk it over? I reckoned you was Shanghai at first."

"We'll eat breakfast, an' you can talk all you want," agreed Mesquite; "but you won't need that gun to talk with, an' you might shoot yoreself with it. Put yore hands up, turn round, an' hold still."

"If I give you my gun you'll take me back to be lynched for somethin' I never done," retorted Arizona. "I'm figgerin' to keep it."

"Then you ain't very much at figgerin'," countered the deputy. "I'd a whole lot rather you'd use it, but bein' a deppity sheriff I got to tell you to turn it over. Stick up yore hands, an' turn 'round." He began to move forward again, his own hands gently swinging past the butts of his guns.

"But I tell you I didn't shoot Cassidy!" snapped Arizona, stiffening a little, and throwing his weight on the balls of his feet.

"Just th' same I'm takin' you back to Twin River for it," said Mesquite, icy lights beginning to show far back in his eyes. "Either draw or elevate!"

Arizona leaped sideways, his hand streak-

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ing forward and up to end in a burst of powder smoke; the reports sounded almost as one. There were three of them, for Mesquite's first shot had cut through the place where Arizona had stood before he leaped; but the second, fired with his left hand and the other gun, drove the fugitive halfway around and made him drop his weapon before he could fire it again.

Arizona bent over and, his left hand holding his wounded right arm, peered through the thinning smoke at the calm deputy, whose left hand held a smoking gun squarely on him. At the deputy's feet lay a second gun, also smoking, and the deputy's right arm hung down at his side, the numbness of the shock slowly wearing off.

"I'm arrestin' you, like I said," growled the deputy. "Step away from that gun; I'll shoot straighter next time."

Arizona slowly complied and scowled at his captor, who now stooped, picked up the weapon at his feet, and sheathed it. Then he walked over to the fugitive's gun, picked it up also with his right hand, emptied it, and threw it far into the brush, not a muscle of his face telling of the pain of that effort. Letting his right arm drop again to his side, Mesquite smiled coldly.

"Bandage up yore arm," he said. "Then you can fix mine. Funny we both was shot in th' same place."

"Funny as hell!" groaned Arizona. He remembered the unhesitating use of the deputy's wounded arm, the force with which it threw away the captured weapon; he remembered that no grimace of pain had accompanied the action, and he sighed as he took his neckerchief and roughly bound up his wounded arm, working with one good hand and his teeth. Then he shuffled forward toward the waiting deputy, trying to appear cowed, but he was nerving himself for one final effort.

While he slowly advanced he drew cigarette papers and tobacco sack from his pocket, and he opened the sack with the aid of his teeth. Inwardly he smiled at how he had cursed the dry tobacco only the day before; now it promised to get him out of a tight place. He would take a gambler's chance, and risk everything on one throw.

"You win, boss," he mumbled, looking down at the ground to hide the gleam in his eyes; but he saw the Colt moving forward to press against his side; and writhing from the contact and getting out of the line of fire, he swiftly moved his good right arm and threw the contents of the sack into Mesquite's eyes and face.

The roar of the Colt was useless, for Arizona was pressing tightly against the squirming man who held it. His good hand was fastened on Mesquite's wrist in a desperate effort to keep the gun pointed away from himself while he sought to tear it from the fingers that gripped it.

The whistling breath of pain in his ears was sweet music to him, and he felt the grip on the gun grow weaker. Exerting all his strength, Arizona at last tore the weapon loose and, not having time to turn it and fire, he raised his arm to bring the heavy butt down on the deputy's head, down on the head of a man who could not see; but the lesson of fortitude and grit he had seen only a few moments before had not been taken by him at its full value.

As his hand arose for the blow that would free him, Mesquite's wounded arm moved swiftly and there came a muffled roar, smoke spurting sideways from Arizona's body. He crumpled and dropped, and at his side sank the victor, tears streaming from his blinded eyes and slowly washing them clean again.

Time passed agonizingly; then Mesquite reached for the canteen close beside him and filled his hands with its water, bathing his burning eyes.

His arm roughly bound up and his eyes still stinging, he slowly arose and looked down at the crumpled figure near the fire. For a moment he stood thus, cursing the idea of taking prisoners; then he gently shook his head and put the savage thought from him.

"Luck, blind luck," he muttered. "How much more have I got to learn?"

THE END OF No. 7

NEXT WEEK: "A GAME OF WITS."

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Honest Fool

By THEODORE GOODRIDGE ROBERTS

Author of "Where All Trails End," "Sea Change," etc.

CHAPTER XV.

SELF-CONTROL.

JULES continued mercilessly; and Lem Stalvart listened as one spellbound. Jules did not spare any one concerned except Marcel Griffou. He made a sorry figure even of himself, and of the boss a thing to blush for, and of Dora Harlow a thing not to be named. He was in a white heat of scorn and anger. His condemnation of Jeff's character and behavior was the most virulent and oft-repeated, but not once did he deal with the son without sinking a few pitiless shafts in the father.

Jules told all that he knew, the whole story of the lying and dissembling that had been going on ever since their arrival on Porcupine Brook. He told about Marcel and her love for and faith in Jeff, of her journey from Quebec, of her sojourn at the bushy farm, and of her expedition through the dark woods to tell him, Jules, of Jeff's capture and incarceration. "Zat is the girl you scorned!" he cried. A little later he concluded his astounding and merciless effort thus: "Look at me—" and he prodded his great chest with an inexorable finger. "I was honest. I was a gentleman. But now? Name of a name! I am no better zan my friends, the Stalvarts."

Lem, who had listened in silence, continued silent after the conclusion. He resumed his pacing of the floor for a minute or two, then went to bed. Jules heard him climbing the stairs laboriously and uncertainly, like a very old man or a toper. But Jules did not care. He thought of Marcel Griffou and was glad of the things he had said.

Next morning Lem asked Jules what the girl intended to do.

"She goes back to her parents to-day," Jules told him.

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"But she can stop here," said the boss. "I'll give her a good home—better than the one at Ste. Jeanne—an' treat her like a daughter. Or I'll give her money. If I've injured her, like you say, I'm willin' to do the right thing now."

"You do not know 'er," replied Jules. "You lack the intelligence. But I will tell 'er what you say."

Jules drove off upstream with Lem's bay roadster hitched to a light wagon. Upon reaching the bushy farm, he found Marcel dressed for the journey, and her little bag packed, and old Mrs. Smith in tears, and old Elbert fuming. The midday meal was ready, and he took the place set for him—but he had no appetite. Marcel was pale but calm. She smiled bravely and frequently patted the old woman's hand. Elbert fumed and swore.

"I've offered her a home," he told Jules, glaring. "She's like a daughter to us. But, no, she won't stop!"

"She 'as a good 'ome," said Jules. "She 'as loving parents."

Elbert continued to glare. Scorn and derision were in the glare. "You give me a pain," he said. "You think ye're smart—but ye're a fool! I wish I was free to tell you what a fool you be. An' what ails you, anyhow? You look like ye'd lost all yer friends in the world an' been sick a-bed a year. Maybe you was shapin' up yerself to this here Dora who's run away with yer yeller-bellied Jeff?"

At that, black wrath flamed in Jules's eyes; and the old man sagged in his chair and lost the use of his tongue.

Jules and Marcel drove away immediately after dinner. She did not look at him, and he looked everywhere but at her. He was amazed at her control of her grief. He was thankful for it. If she had sobbed—God! What would he have done? He trembled to think of it. They drove along the mossy woodland track in silence. The girl was busy with her own thoughts and with wondering what was in the mind of her companion. Jules was not thinking. He did his best not to think.

The Harlow house seemed deserted when they passed it. When they were a short distance beyond it Lem Stalvart stepped into the road in front of them; and Jules drew rein. Lem stood with a foot on the hub of a wheel and looked heavy-eyed at the girl.

"I'm sorry for ever harmin' you," he said. "I was wrong, it seems; and I'm willin' to try to make right the wrong I've done."

She glanced at him, and aside, without speaking.

"I was tellin' Jules here I'd look after you," he continued. "If you want money—well, or a good home. I see now I made a mistake not lettin' Jeff go ahead like he wanted to. I'm through with Jeff. He's a thief, along with whatever else you want to name him."

"You do not understand," she said in a low voice.

"I reckon I understand more'n I did. But give it a name. I'm willin' to do the right thing."

Marcel leaned forward slightly and laid hold of the reins in front of Jules's hands and shook them smartly. The bay roadster moved briskly forward; and Mr. Stalvart was left beside an empty road, without a hub to rest his foot upon.

Jules shook the horse into a trot. "Lem means well," he said. She did not answer; and as he could not think of anything more to say—of anything that a proud and honest man *could* say under the circumstances—he relapsed into silence. The long-legged roadster went along at a spanking pace. The little village at the mouth of Porcupine was passed before the silence in the speeding wagon was again broken. This time it was Marcel who broke it.

"You have been a good friend to me," she said in French.

"I regret that I have not been a better one, more wise and more honest," he replied in the same language.

"But you are honest."

"I knew Jeff—but I did not warn you."

Again silence; and the big bay trotting steadily and swiftly toward the waiting train.

"No one understands," she said at last. "I think every one is blind. Pride is foolish—and terrible, sometimes."

Jules made little of that, though he con-

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sidered every word of it. He answered that he thought honest pride a good thing.

CHAPTER XVI.

TEMPTATIONS.

JULES headed for home immediately upon the departure of the train. He saw nothing of Monday, nothing of the jailer, nothing or nobody to suggest that the law took any interest in him. Upon reaching home, he put up the bay roadster and then wandered into the woods. He forgot all about supper, but returned to the house soon after ten o'clock and went straight to bed. He was up and at work bright and early next morning; but there was that in his eye which warned Lem Stalvart and Tom Skellog that the wise thing for them to do was to ignore his reserved manner and heavy silence.

Skellog, who now knew about the runaway of Jeff and Dora, and about the bootlegging—but nothing about the theft of money—was of the opinion that Dora Harlow had been Jules's girl.

"It would sure make a saint sore, let alone a Frenchman, to go rip a man outer jail an' then have him run off with yer own girl," he said.

Whatever Lem's thoughts were on the subject of Jules and the affairs of Jules's heart, he said nothing downright. All his talk with Tom on the subject rambled wide of the mark.

Marcel Griffou had been gone five days when Lem came upon Jules one night, after the milking, seated on a big bowlder above the stream. Lem sat down, too, and lit his pipe. Jules made no sign of being aware of the other's presence. After smoking for a minute, Lem said: "Jules, I'm without a son now. I'm without son nor daughter."

"Is zat so?" returned Jules in a tired voice. "When did you receive the sad news of Jeff's decease?"

"He is dead as my son. You know what I mean. A bootlegger an' a low thief! He may live sixty years—but he's dead to me."

"You sound like God Almighty—or like your idea of Him. But your idea is wrong. Jeff is a fool, but 'e is your son."

After a considerable silence, Lem said: "You've got a nasty way of sayin' things, Jules—but ye're honest. A man who didn't know ye's well as I do 'd maybe git riled—but I know yer heart. You think right an' act right, and ye're a true friend. I like you, Jules. Always have, from the very first. De'ye mind yer first meetin' with Jeff, when he tried to scrunch yer hand, an' you give him the laugh? That was an old trick of his, showin' off his strength. He was always showin' off. You're the first man he ever gripped that didn't holler 'enough.' But that ain't what I follered ye out here to say, Jules. I come to say how I'll be proud to make a son and heir of you."

"You are very kind," said Jules calmly. "You do me a great honor—but I am content as I am, as your friend and 'ired man, to give honest work for honest wages. I 'ave no ambition to step into the shoes of zat poor, mad, cowardly fool, Jeff. And also, I 'ave already a fazzer. I am already a son and heir."

"An heir? Is your father rich?"

"Yes, 'e was rich—in courage, in good taste, in kindness, in great traditions, in honesty, in beautiful dreams. Pierre Henri St. Simon d'Ance was a rich man—zat poor fisherman. But now 'e is dead."

"I have money and land; and I like you, Jules; and you'd still be yer father's son, even if you took my name. I don't ask ye to deny yer own blood."

"You are very kind—but it is impossible. Jeff is your son."

"You say yerself he's a coward and a fool!"

"True; and I refuse 'is birt-right, or any part of it."

"Then ye're a fool yerself!"

Lem returned to the house in a bad temper.

It was in the brief lull of field work between the hauling of the last load of hay and the cutting of the first swath of oats, that a letter arrived for Jules, postmarked Montreal. It was from Jeff.

DEAR JULES:

You will be sirprised to hear from me I guess. I write to you insted of to the Old Man because I guess Im about as popular with him right now as a skunk at a wedding. The

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truth is Im in a bad fix Jules and I reckon you will have a laugh to hear me say so. I guess you got out of jail easy enough. They would as lieve have the devil in jail nor you I guess—Monday and his gang. Well Jules maybe Im as big a fool as you told me I was quite frequent. Maybe Im all the things you ever called me. Im in a bad hole anyhow. The money I brot with me is all gone and I got a job but that aint the worst. I could kick myself Jules. And if I could undrink all the bad booze I drunk in that country the Old Man is so stuck on Id do it if it killed me. If he hadnt dragged me away from Ste. Jeanne I wouldnt be were I am now thats a sinsh. I guess you know what I mean Jules. Im taking my medicine all right all right and it tastes like hell and onions. Say a good word for me to the Old Man if ever you can think of one Jules.

Yours respectfully,

JULES STALVART.

Jules read this artless production many times, at first with disgust and scorn, but presently with less definite emotions. The more he considered it, the less bitterly did his gorge rise at it and the more tender became his heart. With Jeff so far away, and this letter in one's hand, it was not difficult to forget anger and feel only pity. Pity bred kindred emotions. Gratitude, for instance. He began to feel grateful to Jeff for the very thing that had all but split his heart with rage at the time of its discovery—that graceless, cruel, false, ignoble desertion of Marcel for the girl Dora. His gratitude was all for the sake of Marcel. He shivered at the thought that a man fallen so low, capable of such madness as this, might have done otherwise—might have passed the Harlow house and gone on upstream to the bushy farm and taken Marcel away with him. Now he realized the enormity of such a thought. He realized now that Marcel was fortunate in that matter, however bitter her grief might be. He knew now that it would have been too late for Marcel even to have saved him from his own weakness and folly—that any time since their arrival on Porcupine Brook had been too late.

After mature consideration, Jules offered the letter to Lem.

"Who's it from?" asked the boss suspiciously.

Jules told him; and the boss replied, with an oath, that he neither wanted to see it nor hear anything about it. Jules fixed him with a dangerous eye, stood squarely in front of him and opened the letter.

"You shall 'ear it, nevertheless," he said. "If you try to go away, I shall detain you by force. If you put your fingers in your ears, I shall shake zem out."

Then he read the letter aloud. Lem's face was expressionless.

"It is evident zat your modest Dora is not all your fancy painted," said Jules, folding the letter. "True, Jeff does not mention 'er by name—but it is not necessary."

"He made his bed an' he can lay in it," said Lem. "Spent his money, has he?—the money he stole from me! Well, it's the last of mine he'll ever get a chance to spend."

"You are wrong, my friend. I 'ave never been a fazzer myself, but I know zat you are wrong. Jeff is your own son, 'owever big a fool 'e may be—and partly for zat very reason. In the meantime, I shall do what I can to 'elp the unfortunate weakling; and some day you will be very grateful to me for doing so."

"You'll help him? How d'ye mean, help him?"

"To write 'im a letter not too severe, and to send 'im a modest sum of money."

"Send him money I paid you? Not on yer life, Jules Perdu!"

"It is my money, unless my work is such zat I do not earn it. In zat case—if zat is your opinion of my labor—I will find employment elsewhere. It is for you to say, Mr. Stalvart."

"You go plumb to hell, for all of me!"

"I 'ope zat I shall not find it necessary to go so far for honest employment," returned Jules, gravely.

Jules wrote to Jeff that night, advising him to come home at the earliest opportunity, no matter under what circumstances.

"You must hasten to the formidable task of proving to your good and sorely enraged father, if possible, that you are not entirely devoid of that spirit which is supposed to elevate man above the soulless and degraded level of wild beasts," he wrote, reflecting that this was not too severe, considering the thickness of Jeff's skin.

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He concluded with a reference to an inclosed money order for forty dollars.

Lem rapped on Jules's door, opened it and entered.

"Have you written to him?" he asked.

"I 'ave but now done so," replied Jules; "and to-morrow I must take the letter to the post office and there purchase an order for the dollars I am sending to 'im; and while I am on that errand I shall inquire for a new job."

"Would you quit at the commencement of harvest?" protested Lem.

"It is your idea, your decision, zat I leave you," returned Jules.

"Well, it ain't! Yer pride 'll be the death of you some day, Jules. I didn't mean what I said, and you know it. Send him every dollar you make, if that's the way you feel. It's none of my business. It's yer own money. But what you want to give it to *him* for beats me—unless it's for the woman. And I reckon even you wouldn't be so soft as all that."

"One reason is gratitude, my friend. In doing 'imself much 'arm I see a great deliverance for some one else."

"Ye're thinkin' of the Griffou girl, I reckon."

"I do not deny zat she is better off as she is, even if 'er 'eart be broken, zan she would be if Jeff 'ad kept 'is pledge wiz 'er."

"Maybe—" began Lem; and then, after a pause: "You needn't tell him to come home, for I wouldn't have either of them set foot on my land," he said.

Jules made no reply to that.

"You won't be quittin' me now, Jules?" queried the boss.

"I shall be glad to remain in your service indefinitely," returned Jules. "And now, if you wish to play a game of chess, I am your man."

A week later Lem repeated his offer of adoption to Jules, and Jules again declined the honor.

In due course, a reply to Jules's letter arrived, in which the money order was gratefully acknowledged, but no reference was made to the advice that had gone with it. At about the same time Jules received an envelope bearing the Ste. Jeanne postmark. He opened it with trembling fingers. It contained the money which he had supplied Marcel for her journey—nothing else—not a word! He stared for a long time at the stamped paper—until he had to blink his eyes to rid them of a queer dimness.

"She is honest, at least," he murmured. "As for gratitude—it may be zat it 'as gone out of style—an old-fashioned weakness."

The friendship of Jules and the boss increased daily from that date, as if it had been stimulated by recent discords; but in reality it was grief that strengthened that old bond. Each had his sorrow, and in the ache of it depended more and more the companionship and sympathy of the other. Lem could only guess at the nature and cause of Jules's unhappiness, for Jules always denied the fact when taxed with it; and as to how near the truth he guessed, who can say? Their conversation during meals became less and less general; they played chess every evening, very slowly, or walked aimlessly side by side across stubble and pasture; and the Skellogs began to feel that they belonged to another world. For the third time Lem offered to make Jules his heir; and the refusal this time had no anger in it.

"My acceptance would not give you 'appiness," said Jules, "and it would make me ashamed. Your friendship is of more value to me zan your fortune could ever be; and in friendship I, too, can give, and do so wiz all my heart."

"There's yer pride again," returned Lem, smiling. "Ye're the independentest cuss in the whole world, Jules d'Ance."

CHAPTER XVII.

MUMPHY WORKS FAST.

ON Porcupine Brook the oats were harvested and threshed, the potatoes were dug, the turnips were pulled; and far away in the great city of Montreal ten thousand furnacemen got up steam. The fall of the year, with its imminent problems of self-preservation, was upon urban life as surely as upon rural all over the Northern Hemisphere; and to Montreal, from the southward, came yet another problem in the form of Mr. Dills Mumphy.

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Mumphy had been all night in a day-coach, for his funds were low. His pale eyes looked tired. His neck was still thick, his front still advanced in an imposing curve, but his cheeks drooped. His hard hat of brown felt was not in its first bloom, nor yet in its second; and his vest of a delicate fawn tint showed several spots. In short, he looked a trifle seedy in attire as well as in face. The pockets of his vest still bulged with cigars which, whatever their quality, lacked nothing in bulk. The handsome chain of many fine strands of gold still crossed the salient of his front from one lower pocket of his vest to the other; and if no timekeeper nestled at either extremity of it, the effect on the eye was the same as if there was a watch at each end. He carried a large Gladstone bag in his right hand and a suit case in his left. These were not heavy. None of the trunks in the baggage-car belonged to him. Ignoring porters, the walked unassisted along the platform and through and out of the station. With a cigar cocked in his mouth he looked almost what he pretended to be—a prosperous man with sportive tastes.

Mr. Mumphy was hungry. He had been hungry more than once since he had last seen the Hercules of the North, as he had been several times before his first meeting with that simple strong man. Within easy foot-play of the station he soon found an eating-place which promised the maximum of food and the minimum of damage. There he disposed of fishcakes and coffee, smoked his cigar and perused a last night's paper upon which some former patron had already bestowed mustard and beer with a liberal hand. His pale gaze passed swiftly and blankly over foreign and political news, editorial comment and literary notes. His attention was all for small-typed, out-of-the-way corners of the paper. He departed at last, after staggering the soiled waiter with a quarter all for himself. He found a modest hotel a few doors farther along the street. Perhaps modest is scarcely the word. Its charges were moderate and its appearance was low. He paid a week's rent in advance for a room on the third floor, then bestowed two cigars on the mildly interested clerk.

Mumphy went up to his room, removed shoes and coat and lay down on the complaining bed to think. Poor Dills Mumphy! The more he thought about his experiences since the desertion of the herculean Jules, and about Jules, the sorrier he felt for himself. After the first brief pursuit of the North Woods Hercules he had discovered and undertaken to manage a heavy-shouldered youth who promised great and profitable performances in the squared circle. The youth had failed signally and at every opportunity to keep his promise. With a punch like the kick of a mule he had punched nothing but air. His agile feet had refused to remain where they would do him and his manager the most good, which was under him, between his knees and the floor. His muscular neck had served him only as a thing to alight upon. That venture had chilled and expired on Mumphy's breast, leaving the good sportsman poorer by a third of his wad and two-thirds of his illusions. Thus bereft, he had renewed his quest of Jules, that star exploitation. He had exploited many bread-winners in his day, even bread-and-butter winners, but never another luxury-earner like the big boob from St. Pierre Miquelon. So he had carried his quest all the way back to that foggy isle of fish and cognac; but without a ray of success. He had returned to civilization a poorer and angrier man, had faked a risky living whenever faking was possible, had pawned his watch and diamond pin and diamond rings, had been reduced twice for brief periods to the actual performance of honest work; and now he lay on his back on a third-rate bed in a fourth-rate hotel in Montreal.

Montreal was not entirely new ground for Mumphy. He had been here before, twelve years ago. It was here that he had discovered and persuaded to depart hence with him a clog-dancer of the name of Kate McMurragh, who, as the Señorita Esmeralda, had done very well for him until such time as she had left him and returned to her own country, preferring a husband to a manager as a recipient of her earnings. At his advice, Kate had given up clog-dancing with her Irish name and adopted the tango, then in vogue, with her Spanish appellation,

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to their mutual benefit. Their parting had not been in the best temper, and yet it had not been so violent as to put the chance of a reunion entirely out of court—so thought Mumphy. So he had come to Montreal with two possibilities in mind, the first that of finding and in some way benefiting by Mrs. Kate Benoit, *née* McMurragh, alias Esmeralda; and the second of hearing something of his lost Hercules. Jules was a Frenchman; so what more likely than that he should have come to Quebec (as he had not returned to his island home), and if to the Province of Quebec, what more likely than to the great city of Montreal? Thus had Mr. Mumphy reasoned.

Mumphy consulted a telephone directory, rang up many Benoits and McMurraghs, and failed to learn so much as a hint as to the whereabouts or fate of the Spanish dancer. Later he shaved, changed his collar, counted his money for the twentieth time and went out in search of dinner and diversion. He dined where he had eaten fishcakes earlier in the day, and drank a large bottle of beer with his steak and onions. It was real beer; and it was cheap. He decided to take his diversion by going elsewhere and drinking more beer. Already he felt better. Already he cocked his cigar at a more assured angle. The next place was a large, dim lit room crowded with small tables and various sized males of the human species. Big men in white aprons circulated actively among the tables with bottles and glasses. The air was misted with the smoke of some of the worst tobacco in the world. Mumphy expanded his chest and gave his order.

One bottle had made Mumphy feel that life had already dealt him its unkindest swats, and that any change in his condition was sure to be for the better; and the second bottle caused him to look largely and cheerfully about him as if the sordid room were a world of golden opportunity. He poured and quaffed a glass from the third bottle. He felt prosperous again. He felt managerial. His brain teemed with ideas. His heart swelled with hope. He knew, for a certainty, that nothing in the world was so easy for a clever and experienced man like himself as to acquire easy money. Good old malt! Good old hops! He lit a cigar and drank again. A wonderful, delicious sense of security and ease possessed him. The doubtful condition of his wardrobe, and the fact that his wad had a core of brown paper, were forgotten. The world was his oyster.

A very tall and broad young man of a woebegone countenance and unmistakably rustic air entered, looked bashfully around the crowded room, then sat down at Mumphy's table and signalled to the waiter with a hand like a picnic ham. As the waiter set down the large bottle and the tall glass he said, "How goes it, Jeff?"

"Bum," returned the giant, handing over a quarter.

The waiter departed. Jeff filled his glass and emptied it, and sighed, and produced a pipe. He began to shred tobacco from a thick cake with a knife big enough to skin a moose.

"Have a cigar, friend, invited Mr. Mumphy, extending a large weed adorned with a red and gold band.

For a few seconds there was suspicion in the other's eyes, but this gave way to a look of admiration. The cigar was accepted, and lighted from a match struck and held by the donor in his best manner; and knife, tobacco and pipe were stowed away.

"Drink up an' have another," invited the genial man-of-the-world.

In the other's mumbled thanks was a sincere note of gratitude; and the long glass was again filled and drained in a hurry. Two more bottles were brought, and so deeply was the waiter impressed by Mumphy's style that he mopped up the table with a towel before departing with the empties.

"A great town," said Mumphy.

"It's sure big enough," returned Jeff, without enthusiasm.

"I'm a stranger here," said Mumphy.

"Well, sir, I guess ye might say the same of me," returned Jeff.

"A fool could see you're different from these here," said Mumphy, indicating the men at the other tables with a slight gesture of his cigar. "They're what I'd call scum. No class to 'em. But you?—that's a pony of a different color. You'd make six of them

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shrimps. You were born right an' fed right."

"I'm big enough," admitted the other. "An' I et plenty."

"I'll bet you're somebody where you come from."

Again suspicion flickered in the rustic's eyes. A distressing thought chilled him. This fat stranger was a detective set on his trail by the tireless machinery of the law in connection with the unfortunate episode of the canoe-load of whisky.

Mumphy saw that he had touched a tender spot.

"That's why I've took to you," he continued, tactfully. "I'm like that meself." He paused for a moment to quaff another glass and select a few of the bright ideas with which his brain was swarming. "I'm a great man in my little old home town," he continued. "That's a long ways away —down in ol' Virginy. They name race-hosses after me down there. I've made a name in the world—I'll admit that—but I ain't a millionaire, which is what the folks down home think I am. That's the trouble with little town folks. They think every successful man's a millionaire. So I ain't been home in fifteen years. Pride keeps me away. They'd expect me to build 'em a library an' a hospital. Yes, sir—an' that's more'n I could afford; an' then they'd think my success was all bunk. So it looks like I'll be an old man before I can go home—and all because I've made a name for myself in the great world. Beats hell, don't it?"

It beat Jeff, whatever else. He couldn't make head or tail of it, but it quieted his suspicions. He emptied his second bottle, and another appeared at his elbow.

"I'm an actor-manager," said Mr. Mumphy.

That was high and low Dutch to Jeff; and it went down with a gulp of beer.

"I'm out lookin' for talent—something with class to it," added Mumphy, stimulating his imagination with a long pull. "And I wouldn't wonder but you an' me could do business together," he continued. "You are a strong man. I bet you're strong as a bull. What you want to do is capitalize ver strength."

Jeff stuck out his chest. He was strong, all right.

"I ain't no fadin' lily myself," said Mumphy, extending a large paw across the table. "Take a grip on that, an' I'll soon know how strong you are."

Jeff gripped enthusiastically. Mumphy gasped. "Enough."

"There's only one man I ever see can beat me at that," said Jeff. "I've gripped hundreds, an' some quit at the first squeeze, the same as yerself, an' some quit at the second—but they all quit. All 'cept one."

From the consideration of his numbed right hand, Mumphy lifted his glance and his attention again to his companion.

"Can you swing an axe?" he asked.

"I ain't lookin' for a job in the woods," said Jeff.

"Nor I couldn't give you one if you was," returned Mumphy. "Ain't I told you I'm an actor-manager lookin' for talent? What I want's a strong man for a special act—on the stage, d'ye see?—knockin' chunks big as soup plates out of logs an' chuckin' weights around. I got it—The Tall Timber Terror! That's the dope! That'll go across big—if you can deliver the goods."

Jeff did not grasp the idea immediately. Mumphy explained and elaborated it. His elaborations necessitated further explanations. Talking is thirsty work, and so is listening; and Mumphy was by now expanded far beyond that niggardly mood in which a generous and enterprising man keeps count of such unimportant things as half-dollars.

Mumphy awoke; and on the instant, before he could bestir his brain to the effort of thought, he sensed and felt a number of things. For instance, he felt that he had been drinking beer, and better beer than he had tasted for years, but too much of it; and he sensed that he had been doing business and was again, at last, on the road to easy money. Then he glanced around the room and remembered that he was in Montreal. Next, one by one, he recalled the particulars of his meeting and session with the gigantic and simple bushwhacker. The giant's name was Jeff, but what else he did not know. If he had obtained the giant's

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address he had forgotten it; but he remembered having written and handed over his own name and address. He remembered that they had agreed to meet at noon—Jeff was to call for him—and go out of the city to a spot where Jeff could demonstrate his prowess with an ax and his general fitness to confront the public as The Tall Timber Terror, Lord of Lumberjacks. (That'll fetch 'em!) And what else did he remember? There was something else—talk of something or somebody else that had impressed him at the time as being worth following up. Why hadn't he made a note of it at the time? That's the trouble with real beer. Every rose has its thorn.

Mumphy got out of bed, still searching his mind for a clew to the thing that he remembered to have forgotten; and as his right hand contracted on his shaving brush a twinge of pain gave him the clew. The other strong bushwhacker. That was it. The only man who had ever bested Jeff in the gentle pastime of gripping hands. That was what he had been trying to remember. It was worth remembering; and it might be worth following up. He would make further inquiries into the matter. A man stronger than Jeff, than that giant who stood six feet and three and a half inches in his socks and was wide as a barn door at the shoulders, might prove even a better proposition than the lost Jules.

Jeff turned up at noon; and after lunch he and Mumphy went out of town, travelling by street car and afoot, to a little old farmstead that promised well. There they found a jag of white birch in long lengths, a hefty ax on a long handle, and a tall old man who accepted a dollar and invited them to go ahead. Jeff gave a demonstration of axmanship which satisfied Mumphy and fairly dazzled the old farmer. Then, with chopping-blocks and grindstones and odds-and-ends round the place, he demonstrated his general fitness of arm and back and leg.

"You'll do," said Mumphy, satisfied that he could make a popular turn of Jeff with a little hardening and instruction and a lot of bunk and dressing-up.

On the cityward journey he said, "You're a powerful man, Jeff; and I can show you how to capitalize your strength. But muscles is only a part of that game. It takes brains and experience to put that strong-man stuff across nowadays; and I got the brains and the experience. Leave it to me. Yes, you're strong—but I've known a stronger."

"So've I—but only one," replied Jeff.

"Where was that?" asked Mumphy, casually. "Not in the woods, I bet a dollar to a doughnut. In some circus, I guess—and faked stunts."

"Gimme the dollar," returned Jeff. "Sure it was in the woods—an' no fakin', neither."

"Is that so? It listens fine, Jeff; and maybe I'd believe it if you was to whistle it on your fingers."

"Whistle be damned! I seen him in the woods, I tell you, and in this Province of Quebec, too—away up on Little Musquash."

"What did he do?"

"A plenty. For one thing, he picked up the butt of a big spruce another feller lodged an' carried it out an' clear an' then chucked it away like you would a cigar."

"What was his name?" asked Mumphy, and neither his glance nor his voice was as disinterested as he intended it to be. A sudden hope had put him off his guard.

The gleam of eye and eagerness of voice did not escape Jeff's notice. So Jeff considered the question and the subject before answering. Of a suspicious nature was Jeff, except when blinded by vanity. Now he suspected Mumphy of wanting to find Jules for the purpose of making a professional strong man of him. In that case, where would he, Jeff, get off at? Second best, for a certainty.

"His name?" he queried, scratching an ear. "Now what the hell was it? I clean disremember. He quit the Little Musquash country, anyhow."

A duller man than Dills Mumphy would have known that Jeff was lying; and a duller and less crafty man would have accused him of it. But Mumphy said, in an indifferent and slightly jaded voice, "You sure got a bum memory, Jeff," and let it go at that—for the moment.

A cleverer man than Mumphy might have guessed Jeff's real reason for pretending to forget the strong man's name; and in

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so doing the cleverer man would have lost himself in a fog. Mumphy, not clever enough to guess that Jeff was already jealous of his prospects as a professional strong man, hit on the greater truth by missing the lesser. Had he been cleverer, he would have realized that the Hercules of Little Musquash might be any one of a hundred powerful bushwhackers—but in believing Jeff's pretended ignorance to be an attempt to shield a friend from trouble, and a proof of the recognition of a danger against which he had been warned, Mumphy felt convinced that the man who had made so light of the big spruce was no other than Jules d'Ance.

It is sometimes a mistake to be clever. Luck and the better part of valor are the horses to lay your money on.

Not until hours later did Mumphy refer again to the strong man of the Little Musquash; and that was in his own room in his fourth-rate hotel, long after dinner, when the air was blue with tobacco smoke and the Scotch whisky in the bottle from the nearest government store had ebbed to within three inches of the bottom. And more had happened than the passing of time, the burning of tobacco and the consuming of whisky. Mr. Mumphy had achieved a notable piece of penmanship on two large sheets of legal looking paper, and a clever bit of spell-binding; and two employees of the hotel, in consideration of a cigar and a drink and a quarter apiece, had penned their names on both sheets as witnesses to the signatures of Dills Mumphy and Jeffrey Stalvart; and Mr. Mumphy had slipped his fee of sixty dollars into his pocket. Mumphy had tried for one hundred, but Jeff had sworn loudly and violently that sixty constituted his entire capital. The documents had been folded, and one had been tucked away against Jeff's heart and the other against Mumphy's.

Jeff felt fine. Mumphy felt very well. Jeff felt the world at his feet and a future of carefree swagger and easy money before him. Mumphy felt Jeff at his feet, to be used or discarded as circumstances might suggest. Jeff talked loudly and boastfully. Mumphy spoke softly. The ego of each was expanded and warmed. Jeff told of some startling feats of strength which he had performed.

"I'll bet a dollar he ain't any stronger'n you," said Mumphy.

"Who ain't?" asked Jeff, pausing in the middle of a heroic scene.

"That feller you told me about. Louis, or Pierre, or Jules you called him. Somethin' like that. Some French name. But I bet a dollar he wasn't as strong as you, whatever his name might be. You're too modest."

"He ain't as big as me, that's a fact," returned Jeff. "But he's real powerful. Sqooze my hand till I hollered." He paused uncertainly and stared owlishly at his companion.

It was quite evident to Mumphy that Jeff was trying to think; so he emptied what was left in the open bottle equally into the two glasses, and produced a second bottle from under the table and uncorked it. Jeff drained his glass, blinked, gasped, nodded his head.

"Jules is strong," he continued weightily, "but maybe we kinder overrated him at first because he was a stranger. I wouldn't wonder. An' he was smart. Maybe I was jist as strong—but Jules was slick. He'd snap into it. That was his way."

"And ours, too, Jeff," said the genial Mumphy. "There stands a bottle waitin' for you to snap right into it."

Two hours later, Jeff retired. His retirement was not an elaborate performance. It consisted of nothing more than a slow and gentle slide, in the second stage of which his back rested on the seat of his chair, in the third stage his shoulders, and in the fourth the chair was entirely vacated and he reclined full-length on the floor with his face to the ceiling.

Mumphy fetched a pillow from the bed and placed it beneath the unconscious head of the Tall Timber Terror. Mumphy's dealings with the second bottle had consisted almost entirely of generous gestures. He bathed his brow and eyes and the back of his thick neck with cold water and felt almost as good as new. For a little while he sat on the edge of his bed and thought hard. He knew a good deal now about the recent career of his lost Hercules of the

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North—enough, he felt sure, to lead swiftly and easily to the discovery and recovery of priceless Master Jules. He must decide immediately on one or two courses. Was he to go ahead with this fellow Jeff, or had he better go after Jules? Thanks to the glow in his veins, he felt no doubt as to the result of a meeting with the might man from St. Pierre. He would win him to compliance, that was certain, either by kindness or threats of the law. And as talent to be exploited, Jules was worth two of this big boob Jeff. He could see that Jeff lacked the heart ("guts" was the expression in Mr. Mumphy's he-man mind), to be first-rate at anything; and that he fell far short of Jules even in the matter of sheer muscle. But which course would he take?—go ahead with Jeff or go after Jules? He decided to devote a minute or so to an attempt to learn something more about Jeff before making the greater decision. So he went over and sank to his knees beside the unconscious giant and gently frisked him.

The first thing he found was a wallet of black leather containing one hundred dollars. This sum demands an immediate explanation in the light of Jeff's urgent request to Jules for money made and answered some time ago. The truth is, Jeff possessed that paradoxical streak of shrewdness that is so often to be found in the most reckless and blundering of men if they be cowards as well as fools. And that's what Jeff was! He had held out on Dora and he had lied to Jules. Dora was ignorant of the fact that he had robbed his father. Had she known of it she would have objected violently, though not on moral grounds. To hopelessly estrange a rich parent for seven hundred dollars would have seemed to her the act of an imbecile. Her ambition was to have the spending of Lem's money some day; and for this she had run away with Jeff when he had to move in a hurry, rather than lose touch with him. She believed herself to be clever enough to return with Jeff to the paternal roof in a little while and pose to Lem as the savior of Jeff and of the family respectability. For Jeff himself she cared nothing. Jeff had held out on her from the first as far as his infatuation and vanity had permitted. He had given her one hundred dollars immediately upon their arrival in the great city; and her speed and style of disposing of it had been a warning to him. But she had soon blandished another hundred out of him. She had asked for a third and been refused it; and there had been an unpleasant scene. Then he had told her that he had written to his father; and, a few days later, that Lem had sent him one hundred dollars and a promise of that sum every month until such time as he could return with impunity and his bride to the Porcupine Brook country. Jeff had made a good story; and Dora had believed it. She had felt relief and security in this seeming proof that her father-in-law was as great a fool as her husband; so, in the lightness of her heart, and remembering certain approving glances of the elder Stalvart, she had blown most of the hundred and instructed Jeff to write and tell papa that she was ill and required a nurse. Jeff had written to Jules. Jeff had found out a gambling joint and tried to turn one hundred dollars into a thousand, with the logical result. He had tried to discourage the lady's appetite for glitter and wine and jazz, and had been called a tight-wad, a farmer and a fool for his trouble. He kept up his pretense of receiving money from Lem. Dora made friends of whom Jeff disapproved and at the same time stood in awe. One of these told him of an easy way to make money; and it had cost him fifty. In Mr. Mumphy poor Jeff had seen a golden hope, a way out of his fast-gathering difficulties. With Mr. Mumphy he would make more money then he would tell Dora about and thus would be able to keep up the story of paternal generosity indefinitely. Otherwise—he had a terrible suspicion that if Dora knew that he had queered himself irrevocably with the old man he would lose that fascinating creature forever. But even when signing the agreement, drunk as he was, he had held out on Mumphy and sworn that sixty dollars was every cent he had in the world.

When Mumphy came upon the sum of one hundred dollars in Jeff's wallet, he very naturally glowed with righteous indignation at the realization that the rustic giant had already lied to him and attempted to do

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him one in the eye to the extent of forty actual iron men.

"An' after what I've done for him!—give 'im a good job with easy money!" muttered Mumphy. "Thank God I've found out he's crooked before it was too late!"

And, there and then, Mr. Mumphy made his decision. He would drop this big boob, this fourflusher, this crook, and go after Jules. Since the uncorking of the second bottle of whisky, he had heard enough to satisfy him that Jules was to be found at or near a place of the name of Ste. Jeanne.

CHAPTER XVIII.

LUCK, HARD AND SOFT.

HAVING made his decision, Mr. Mumphy acted swiftly and without hesitation. He returned the wallet to Jeff's pocket—empty. He found no papers on the sleeper except the recently signed agreement, of which he took possession. He pulled off Jeff's shoes and coat, dragged him over to the bed and lifted him onto it, reasoning to the effect that a man will sleep longer on an indifferently soft mattress than on a hard floor. He then switched off the light and opened a window and looked out. This window was in a side of the hotel overlooking a narrow lane. Snow was falling. He closed the window quickly, fearing the effect of fresh air on the sleeper. He spread his own overcoat, a sportive autumn model that had seen better days, tenderly over Jeff's feet. He rolled up Jeff's overcoat which, though many years old, was of good broadcloth and fur-lined and had been worn only on great occasions. It was somewhat short for Jeff—but it would be long enough for a shorter man. He placed the bottle, not quite empty, and a glass, on a chair beside the bed. He opened the window again and threw out his bag, his suit case, his hat and Jeff's overcoat. After closing the window and drawing down the blind, he stood for half a minute beside the bed, listening to Jeff's breathing and sensing the depth of his slumber. Reassured, he went to the door, opened it, stepped out, closed it and locked it. He put the key in his pocket.

Mumphy went down stairs, hatless, overcoatless. The night porter dozed in a chair in the desolate office. Mumphy shook him gently until he opened his eyes.

"Got a bottle of MacCulley's Glenballyhoo?" asked Mumphy.

The porter had not; and he apologized, in his own simple way, for not having that which does not exist. Mumphy had taken no chances of receiving an affirmative answer.

"That's all right, for I know where I can get it," said Mumphy. "Friend of my friend's in the next street. It ain't a common blend. I'll dodge out an' get it. Must have it. Sorry I disturbed you. I'll leave the door on the latch."

He slipped a fifty-cent piece into the drowsy porter's hand and let himself out of the front door. Snow was falling thickly.

The porter pocketed the fifty cents and closed his eyes. He opened his eyes an hour later, glanced at the clock, wondered if Mr. Mumphy had yet returned, and dozed off again.

Jeff Stalvart did not come to the surface until eight o'clock, and then only for a little while. He happened to be lying on his right ear; so, upon opening his left eye, the first thing he saw by the very faint light which fell through the transom above the door was the bottle on the chair so conveniently beside him. And the second thing he saw was the convenient glass. He reached over with his left arm, tipped a man's size shot from the bottle into the glass and from the glass into his woolly mouth. He gasped, breathed deep, and sank again.

It was eleven o'clock when the chambermaid on that floor reported to the clerk that she had knocked five separate times on Mr. Mumphy's door without effect. The clerk went up, climbed upon a chair and looked through the transom. The mechanism by which the transom was opened and shut being defective, and the sash being stuck midway between the two extremes, it was impossible for the young man to obtrude his head far enough to obtain a comprehensive view of the room. The head of the bed being against the near wall, that article of furniture was only visible for half its length,

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from the foot up. But it was evident that the bed was occupied, and that Mr. Mumphy's overcoat was spread over the occupant's feet and legs. A cold reek of stale cigar smoke and spirits was in the clerk's nose. He descended cautiously from the chair.

"It's all right," he said to the woman. "Let him sleep it off."

It was one o'clock when Jeff came to the surface a second time. He felt perfectly comfortable while he lay still, but decidedly queer when he moved his head. For a moment he was at a loss to know where he was, mystified by the unfamiliar appearance of the dimly disclosed surroundings—but only for a moment. The incidents of the afternoon and evening with Mr. Mumphy came to him, confusedly at first, but presently in their proper sequence. He remembered the trip into the country, the agreement, and his contribution of sixty dollars, instead of one hundred, toward the preliminary expenses. He was safe. His future was assured. He was a great man. Dora would be dazzled by him. Those friends of hers of whom he so strongly disapproved yet stood in awe, they, too, would be dazzled, they in their turn would be awed.

His vest was still on him, though his coat was hanging on the foot of the bed. He produced his watch and held it before his eyes. One o'clock! He must have had a skinful! He supposed that Mr. Mumphy had arisen and gone forth long ago, to breakfast and perhaps to order the stage costume for the Tall Timber Terror. Observing the bottle and glass beside him, he helped himself to the last of the whisky. Presently he sat up; and, a little later, he ventured from the bed to the nearest window and shot the blind all the way up. A gray, flickering light came in to him from myriads of descending snowflakes. He pushed up the sash and gulped the fresh, raw air into his mighty lungs. He was soon steady enough to bathe his head in cold water. But he found the lacing of his shoes a long and heart-breaking task. Now, for the first time, he noticed and recognized Mr. Mumphy's overcoat on the bed. He looked around for his own overcoat, but failed to see it. He became aware of the absence of Mumphy's bag and suit case from the place near the foot of the bed which they had occupied last night. He looked everywhere, even under the bed (which was a painful proceeding), without finding them. A sickening, chilling, undefined suspicion struck him like a pailful of ice water. He sat down limply on the edge of the bed and drew his coat onto his lap and explored its pockets with fingers that fumbled as if they had been suddenly frost-nipped. Here was the wallet. Blessed relief! He hesitated for a moment—and then he opened it.

Jeff pulled at the locked door. He pulled again. He yanked. He was wild with anger and fright. His last hundred gone! —his sixty gone!— his fur-lined coat and his fine job gone! With a mighty yank that would not be denied, he pulled the knob of the door clean off and, as a result of this feat of strength, crashed to the floor on the flat of his back with such force and weight as to shake the windows. But he was on his feet again when the clerk unlocked the door.

"I've been robbed!" he cried.

He pushed the clerk aside and fled.

He found his wife at home. She looked at him queerly, but he was far too desperately perturbed to notice such a little thing as a look. He even failed to notice that she did not ask him where he had been all night. He sat down swearing and continued to swear. He did not notice the pallor of her face nor the apprehension in her eyes. After handing out a string of ear-blisterers, he became more intelligible and cried, "I've been robbed!—cleaned out!—skinned!—by the —— —— ——!"

Dora said nothing; but a tentative glimmer that may have been of relief lighted her beautiful eyes.

"Robbed, d'ye hear me?" he continued, frantically. "Trimmed to my last dollar —an' doped, too, I guess—by a —— who called himself Mumphy! Took my money —every last damned dollar of it—an' my overcoat, too—the dirty—"

The light increased and steadied in Dora's eyes.

"When did all that happen?" she asked.

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"Last night, if you want to know. And I'm picked clean—an' cheated out of a big job into the bargain— Now you know it! —an' what the hell are you goin' to do about it?"

"Last night?" The color returned slowly but surely to the delicate ovals of her cheeks and the last shadow of apprehension slipped from her eyes. "Then you were out all?—that's where you were? That's what you were doing last night, was it?—gambling away yer money. You big boob! How much did you lose? It couldn't of been much, for you hadn't much. Not enough to curse an' holler an' rave about, anyhow—you big coward!"

"I had a hundred an sixty dollars," replied Jeff, sullenly.

"One hundred and sixty! Where'd you get that much? Another check from yer old man, hey?—and you held out on me!"

Jeff was desperate. He uttered a mirthless, ironical, bitter guffaw.

"Another check from the old man!" he jeered. "You'll be gettin' a weddin' present from God Almighty before I'll get a dollar from my old man!—an' now you know it."

"What d'ye mean by that, you fool?"

Jeff told her. She sat down, stunned for a moment. When she spoke she did so quietly, greatly to his astonishment.

"So you stole money from him," she said. "You have less brains than I thought, even. You could of made it up with him about the bootleggin' easy enough —in time. What d'ye reckon to do now?"

"I'll get work, Dora—a real job—an' we'll get along fine. I've had hard luck—that feller Monday an' everythin'—that was bum luck—an' Charlie's fault more'n mine. But it was me got pinched. But if we get out o' this damn town I'll soon find a way to make money."

She continued to regard him in a meditative silence, with cool and thoughtful eyes.

"Don't take it too hard, Dora," he continued. "I sure done my best to make a pot of money for you. But if we got out of this here town we'd soon be all right. I might even make big money in the woods —with better luck than last time—but that'll take some thinkin' over. I was afeard you'd bawl me out worse'n you did, girl. Now I'll drink some tea, I guess."

"You wait a minute," she said. "I ain't goin' to have your old man nor nobody else get me wrong about that money you stole. If I'd knowed that I wouldn't of ran away with you. It was your own doin's, an' yours alone; and you set right down there at the table, Jeff Stalvart, and say so like a man. Write it down in black and white and put your name to it. I ain't ever going to have it throwed up in my face that I married a thief with my eyes open."

Anything for peace was the way Jeff felt at that moment. He wanted to drink tea, sleep, then sort out the hazy, hopeful and more or less crooked plans for the future which were already glimmering on the inflamed lining of his skull. He still possessed his gold watch and gold chain and two rings, and Jules would be good for another forty; and if he could get Dora away to the woods with him—handy to the provincial border, for choice—and find an honest partner, all might yet be well. He felt better for having told the truth to Dora. He had never imagined that she would receive the confession so quietly, suspecting as he did that his chief asset in her eyes was his wealthy father.

"What d'ye want me to do about it?" he asked.

She sat him down at the table and fetched him pen and paper and ink. She told him to commence with the address and date—which he did. After which, to her dictation, he wrote as follows:—

> To Lemuel Stalvart esquire or whoever else it might concern.—I, Jeffrey Stalvart, son of above L. Stalvart, do swear and vow so help me God that my wife Dora Stalvart who was Miss Dora Harlow did not know untill I told her of it today that I robbed my father the above mentioned Lemuel Stalvart of a certain sum of money. I did so without her knowledge for I knew she would refuse to elope with me if she knew I robbed my father or any man. And moreover the said Dora Stalvart my wife had no knowledge of the true nature of the business I was engaged in just previous to our marriage but believed that I was cruising timber land, which is what I said I was doing.

"That starts out true enough," said Jeff, "but the balance of it's a complete lie."

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"What does a few lies more or less matter to you?" retorted Dora. "I guess the least you can do for me after the lies you've told me an' the way you've ruined my life is lie some more when I ask you to. Now write, 'All of which I swear to be true and confessed by my own free will because of the great wrong I have done to my wife, Dora, both as such and as Miss Dora Harlow, so help me God. Yours truly, Jeffrey Stalvart."

Jeff wrote as instructed, then made tea for himself, drank it and went to bed to sleep off the hangover. He was soon snoring.

Dora too was sleepy, but a cup of tea brisked her up. She too had lost considerable sleep last night; and at that thought a sly smile gently twitched the corners of her pink lips. But she had no time now for bed. From the front of her dress, next to her skin, she drew a tiny silk bag, which she slipped into her purse. Moving noiselessly, she packed a suit case, attired herself for the street, reddened her lips and powdered her nose, and as she did these things quickly and efficiently, she reflected that her condition was not nearly so bad as it would have been if Jeff had not been the complete fool that he was. And her luck had stood by her handsomely. She had taken chances; and yesterday and last night she had tested it to the limit, Heaven knows! And it had not failed her. The disclosure of Jeff's bone-head play with his father and the unfortunate state of affairs between sire and son was a cruel blow to her; but, even so, she had much to be thankful for; and, as a poor deluded and innocent wife and daughter-in-law, she intended to make the most of the chance luck had given her. She closed the door behind her without a sound.

If you think that Dora stole away from the penniless and snoring Jeff to speed to the arms of one of those friends of hers of whom Jeff disapproved and stood in awe, you are wrong and you underrate her intelligence. She had no intention of straining her luck by repeating that particular test. At the top of the street she entered a public conveyance, a low sleigh draped with hairy robes and with a red-nosed driver perched on a high seat in front. Away she went to a tinkling and jingling of silver bells. She alighted at a fashionable jeweler's; returned to the sleigh twenty minutes later and drove to another fashionable jeweler's; entered the sleigh again—now with her purse full and the tiny silken bag empty—and drove to the Windsor Station. She was no sentimentalist, this Dora. She cared no more for the rings which she had but now sold back to the persons from whom they had been bought than the exact sums for which she had resold them; and for the gentlemen who had made the original purchases she cared no more than for the big boob, Jeff. She bought a ticket and boarded a train.

Jeff awoke in due course. All evening and all night he sat up and waited for Dora. He did not notice the absence of her suit case, her new coat and the finest of her finery until morning. For an hour or two he sat inert, dazed, helplesss, incredulous. This was too much—to be deserted twice in twenty-four hours. It was more than one man's share of humiliation; and for hours he refused to believe it. Until well along in the afternoon he did nothing but wait. Then he recalled the names of certain gentlemen with whom he and Dora had dipped occasionally into the bright night life of the city. He looked them up in the telephone directory and then rang them up. Each replied that he knew nothing of the whereabouts of Mrs. Stalvart; but two of them were encouragingly interested. One of these called upon Jeff that night, heard his sad story with a hardening jaw and clouding brow, then cursed Jeff out for a fool and Dora for something else and departed in a sulphurous haze. Jeff spent that night too in a chair, still waiting, and more dazed than ever. In the morning the other friend who had evinced interest on the telephone turned up in quest of further and more particular information. He, like the other, listened to Jeff's account of his desertion with a freezing jaw and a lowering brow. He, too, departed in a bitter and biting humor. This manner of expressing anxiety struck Jeff as unusual, to say the least of it; and though he knew nothing of the two diamond rings, his bewilderment was tinged with an ugly suspicion that may have been of the truth.

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Jeff gave two more days to vain inquiries and haphazard searching and dull sitting around and futile cursing, and, all the while, dark suspicions of the two men who had called upon him in connection with Dora's disappearance sprouted and grew in his mind. He suspected them of being deep and subtle liars in word and act and appearance; and these suspicions gathered and shaped at last into the belief that one or both of them knew all about Dora's flight and present whereabouts, and that the bawlings-out and darkling brows had been fine bits of play-acting.

In the meantime Jeff had sold his gold watch and chain and written a desperate letter to Jules.

Now he bethought himself of the imminence of Wednesday, and of his distrustful landlord demanding a week's rent of the snug little furnished flat. A milkman and a baker would also make demands on that day. A laundryman and a gas bill were also to be considered. Every little helps, he reflected.

He could find a room for his lonely and humiliated self somewhere in another part of the town for a quarter of the rental of this snug little flat. So he packed and departed at ten o'clock on Tuesday night.

Jeff drank a quantity of hard liquor, met and beat up one of those smooth gentlemen of whom he disapproved and, under normal conditions, stood in awe, and went to jail for fifteen days.

What of Mr. Mumphy in the meantime? Mr. Mumphy sought the village of Ste. Jeanne and his lost Jules. He journeyed here and there along secondary railroads, rocked from side to side, jolted up and down, jerked fore and aft. Sometimes he was stuck in a snowdrift for hours, hunched in Jeff's fur-lined overcoat while the inadequate train crew shovelled like grave-diggers in front of the cow-catcher. Sometimes he was stuck in comfortless backwoods hotels, on a diet of doughnuts and fried ham and boiled tea, for days and nights on end.

He lost weight; and he learned that the great Province of Quebec is thickly spattered with places named Ste. Jeanne—Ste. Jeanne This and That and T'other. He cursed himself for not having tricked more particular information out of the befuddled Jeff. He visited four wrong Ste. Jeannes, where nothing was known of any Jules d'Ance or any Stalvart, before he crept wearily into the right one.

Mr. Mumphy's collars, numbered twenty, were by this time two sizes too large for him, and his bulging lower front was nothing but a sensation of discomfort; and his liver felt like a stale doughnut. Without hope, having hoped in vain so often before, he made his way to the saw-mill, and from there, after inquiry, to the boarding-house. The smell alone of that house, as it met him at the door, caused his head to swim and his stomach to quake and added an ounce of dead and bitter weight to that poor thing that had been his liver. He staggered to his room and lay flat on the bed until the supper bell rang. He was in no hurry to inquire for Jules, for he felt a horror of again learning that this was not the right Ste. Jeanne; but, after a supper of unsweetened coffee, without any milk in it, he felt strong enough to put the question to the proprietor.

"Jules d'Ance?" returned the proprietor. "There was a Jules—what was his name?—Perdu, that was it. Worked on Little Musquash for Lem Stalvart. But Perdu was his name. Ain't that right, Louis?"

The man thus addressed nodded his head. He stood at Mumphy's elbow. He was a big fellow, with a fur cap pulled down about his ears, and a four days' growth of black beard veiling all of his face except his blunt nose and quick black eyes. He nudged Mr. Mumphy.

"Friend o' yers, dat lad Jules?" he asked.

The mention of the name Stalvart had satisfied Mumphy that he was on the right track at last. He turned and met the fixed regard of Louis and saw danger there.

"That's as may be," he replied. "Jules d'Ance was the name of the man I was askin' about."

"This here Jules was a strong man an' done some strong things—ain't that so, Louis?" said the proprietor.

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Louis scowled; and Mumphy noted the scowl.

"Where did you say he was now?" asked Mumphy.

"I didn't say, 'cause I don't know," replied the proprietor. "He come here, out of the woods, with the Stalvarts, in the spring of the year—last year. But he wasn't here long. Lem Stalvart sold out an' went away, and Jeff an' Jules went with 'im. But I don't know what for nor where to."

Mumphy's face showed his bitter disappointment. "Far away?" he asked in a broken voice.

"Damn fy know," returned the proprietor.

Mumphy went up to his bedroom and closed the door and said some very hard things about the world in general and Jules d'Ance and Jeff Stalvart and himself in particular.

He was thus occupied when there sounded a cautious rapping on the door. After a moment's hesitation he invited the rapper to come in. The door opened and the big fellow, Louis, still with his fur cap on his head, entered quickly yet smoothly. With the same effort, it seemed even with the same movement, with which he crossed the threshold, he closed the door behind him. He stepped close to Mumphy, who sat on the edge of the bed, and stooped over him.

"Wot d'ye want wid zis 'ere Jules?" he whispered.

"What's that to you?" returned Mumphy.

For seconds their glances held and probed—veiled, searching, illuminating glances. Each disclosed something of the truth, each read something of the truth.

"Yankee?" queried the bushwhacker.

"I am," admitted Mumphy. "You're smart." And he smiled.

"Come wid me," said the other. "I know some t'ing you lak to 'ear, maybe. Foller me outside—an' we go to Griffou's place an' talk plenty — an' drink some, too."

"Done," replied Mumphy, brightening to a simultaneous internal agitation of hope and thirst.

Louis Gerou slipped from the room as swiftly and smoothily as he had slipped into it.

CHAPTER XIX.

A PAIR OF BLUE EYES.

AND what of Dora Stalvart, *née* Harlow, who, having eloped with a rich man's only son for the relationship of daughter-in-law rather than for that of wife, had packed her little bag and left her husband flat and snoring upon proving beyond a doubt, after several months of feverish matrimony, the wisdom of her original idea and mental attitude?

Winter came early to Porcupine Brook that year. Plentiful harvests had been garnered on Lem Stalvart's big farm; and herds and flocks had been increased by purchase after the housing of the turnips. Lem could afford to farm right. The care of the live stock, including the milking, kept the boss and Tom Skellog busy; and Jules, who derived a degree of comfort from the snow-muffled quiet of the woods, undertook to get out next year's fuel single-handed. Jules went alone every morning into a high grove of old-growth birches and maples, with an axe on his shoulder and his lunch in his pocket, and there wrought alone all day; and Lem and the Skellogs worked about the barns and house all day; but at night, after supper, Lem and Jules left the kitchen to the Skellogs and played chess and talked, and played chess again, in their own sitting-room. In the sitting-room were Jules's beloved books, and new complete sets of several standard authors recently purchased by Lem, and a fire on an open hearth, and a collection of the shabbiest and most comfortable chairs in the world. There many terrific battles were fought between the red pieces and the white, and more terrific battles (in the deep heart of Jules) when Lem talked of what he would do and how he would feel if he had a son like Jules instead of none at all; but nothing of the conflict of either the mock battles or the real showed in Jules's calm face and still, dark eyes.

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The night of the first day of December was still and star-lit and just frosty enough to keep the world's enveloping robe of snow dry and light. By ten o'clock the Skellogs were in bed and the only windows showing so much as a chink of light were those of the sitting-room; and the chunky sticks of rock-maple on the old fire-dogs had subsided and broken to a great mound of red embers across the wide hearth; and Lem and Jules were deep in their third game. The shaded lamp, which stood on a stand of its own beside the chess-table, did little more than illuminate the embattled rooks and knights and pawns. The mass of embers on the hearth sent a wavering glow up the walls. Jules put out his right hand to play his queen, only to withdraw it and turn his head slightly without moving his glance from the ivory pieces.

"What is zat?" he asked.

"What?" returned Lem, glancing across at him.

The sitting-room had an outer door as well as an inner. Jules twisted his head all the way around now and looked at the door behind him. Lem, looking straight to his front across the little table, also stared at the door. They both saw the brass knob turn this way and then that way. But the door was locked.

"Now who the devil would that be?" queried Lem, in a thin voice.

Jules jumped to the door and turned the key and pulled the door wide open, stepping swiftly backward and aside with it. There on the threshold stood a woman, swaying. So for a few seconds, and then she swayed forward into the room and crumpled gracefully to the floor, letting fall a suit case as she subsided.

Jules shut the door and stood, silent, with his back to it. For one heart-tearing moment he had hoped, he had even thought, that this was Marcel. A second glance had disillusioned him. Lem continued to stare wide-eyed, speechless and motionless. The unexpected visitor lay broken but graceful, crushed and yet as alluring as pitiful to the eye. She lay on a slender hip, and yet with her breast on the carpet and her face on an upflung forearm. Even Lem could see that she was not of that countryside. The style and material of her wraps and small hat told him so, as did the perfection of her shoes and gaiters and the rounded sheen of sheer silk above the tops of the gaiters. Her slender shoulders moved softly, and a sound of half-stifled sobs, expressive of both grief and exhaustion, came from her hidden lips. A sudden suspicion came to Jules, and he raised his glance. Lem looked up at the same moment, the glances of the friends met, the suspicion aroused passed from one to the other, and Lem's cheeks paled and his eyes narrowed.

Jules stepped forward, stooped, slipped his hands about the girl's waist and lifted her easily in his arms. He moved over to a low, soft old chair and lowered her gently into it. And now he saw her face and her tear-dimmed eyes. But tears had washed nothing of the pure azure from those eyes, nor had anything flawed or hardened them. It was Dora.

Jules moved aside, hesitated, looked helplessly at Lem and sat down in the nearest chair. Lem remained motionless and silent, staring at the limp figure in the old chair. Dora covered her eyes with her small gloved hands. They could see her lips and small chin. Her lips, pink now instead of artfully scarlet, and slightly parted, quivered childishly. (Perhaps there was more art in that innocent natural pink than there had ever been in the applied scarlet.) Lem shifted his glance to Jules's calm face, twitched his shoulders, scowled at Jules, then got slowly to his feet. He stood glaring at Jules.

"What ails you?" he asked. "Can't you say something?"

Jules smiled at him somewhat wanly. "But certainly," he said. 'If zis were my 'house, I would ask the lady to remove 'er 'at and take a little refreshment. I would make a cup of tea. I would be 'ospitable."

Lem turned his back on Jules and his scowl upon the girl.

"Have you come back alone?" he asked, in a harsh voice.

Her answer was a slight inclination of the head and a piteous sob.

"Had enough of him already, hey?" he asked, with sneering bitterness.

She spoke then for the first time, still

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with her hands before her face, pressed tight to her eyes. She spoke slowly, brokenly.

"When I heard—what he did—the money he stole—when he told me that—I ran away from him—for shame," she said.

"You don't say so?" jeered Lem. "What money was that?"

"What he—robbed—from you," she sobbed. "I knew he was—what he was put in jail for—but I didn't—know—he'd rob his own—father."

"The hell you didn't!" exclaimed Lem. "Now look a here!—that don't go down with me—for what else would he of taken the money for but to spend on you?"

"But—but—I didn't know!" she cried, lowering her hands from her dewy eyes and giving Lem a piteous, innocent, timid azure glance.

He turned quickly away and caught a faint smile on Jules's face.

"What the devil d'you see to grin at?" he cried.

"I do not grin, my dear Lem," returned Jules, "but smile a little at your bad manners and good 'eart. I shall go now and fetch a kettle, tea and food, for I am sure Miss Dora—nay, Miss Jeff, I am sure—will be better for refreshment."

He lit a candle, and with it in his hand left the room by the inner door. He was back in a few minutes with a small kettle full of water, a plate of bread and butter and a teapot. He found the boss still standing where he had left him, but now with a square of paper in his hand and a look of clouded uncertainty on his face.

"Here's their marriage certificate," said the boss, dully.

"Of course," returned Jules, placing the kettle on the embers, pot and plate on the chess table, and bowing to Dora. "If you expected no marriage certificate you are very dull—a poor judge of character. Jeff might possibly overlook a small matter like zat, but not so zis lady."

Both the others were looking at him, the girl between narrowed lids and Lem with wide-eyed questioning tinged with doubt and surprise. He looked at the girl, and instantly the white lids lifted and a light of suffering and timid appeal shone upon him. She sat up and, with trembling hand, produced another paper from somewhere about her slender person. This she extended toward Jules with piteously beseeching look and gesture. But there was more in her look than that; and he proved it, strangely fascinated, as he accepted the paper. What he saw there was the fact that she had understood his remark concerning her character as irony. But that was not all. Could it be that she had the amazing nerve to ask him to think better of her, to accept her as what she was pretending to be to Lem? Could it be that she mistook him for such a halfwit as that?

He turned his attention—and not without an effort—to the paper in his hand. He immediately recognized Jeff's copy book fist. He read it slowly; and, feeling her glance upon him, he kept his face still as a mask.

"What's that you got there?" asked Lem, having at last exhausted the marriage certificate's arsenal of emotional thrills and chills.

"A confession of Jeff's," said Jules, with nothing in his voice. "It seems zat she was not even aware zat Jeff 'ad attempted to be a bootlegger, according to Jeff's written statement."

"Not until I heard he was in jail," sighed Dora, honestly, tremulously. "I knew then, of course—before I run away with him—because he told me. It was bad of me—but—but—"

Jules handed the confession to Lem, who perused it with an expression of growing horror and uncertainty and mental anguish. It shook in his hard brown hand. He blinked his eyes at it. He backed up and sank heavily into a chair, still holding the paper before his face.

"My God!" he whispered. "No good. Worse nor I reckoned he was—for I blamed the woman, too. But he wasn't even straight with her—even when he run away with her! No good—an' never was!"

"Do not feel so badly as zat!" cried Jules, striding over and laying a hand on Lem's shoulder. "What is zat? A piece of paper! It makes Jeff no worse zan you knew—for perhaps 'e was drunk when 'e wrote it. Yes, zat is it, you may be sure, my dear Lem!"

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"And I am to blame!" cried the girl. "Yes, I am to blame—for going away with him like that—for loving him."

"You were a fool!" said Lem angrily.

"And I love him still," returned Dora; and again she bowed her head and covered her eyes with her hands.

Later, she managed to drink a cup of tea and nibble a slice of bread. Then, after stowing the marriage certificate and Jeff's confession safely away, she got weakly to her feet.

"I must go now," she said, smiling wistfully and bravely at Lem and extending her hand. "I came here first. Now I must go home."

Lem took her hand awkwardly, tried to say something, released the hand and turned to Jules, his face a study in unhappy indecision.

"She's goin' home—back to her pa an' ma," he said. "And it's real late. They'll be a-bed, an' sound asleep, the both of 'em."

"I shall be delighted to escort 'er, and to carry 'er bag," said Jules, bowing gravely. "I will put on my boots. It will take but a moment."

"But it's late, an' they'll be sound asleep," said Lem. "She must be all tired out, too. Oh, hell! An' I suppose you blame it all on *me?* But don't you trouble to put on yer boots. I reckon I can put on mine. It's up to me I guess."

The girl protested timidly. She could go alone, she said. She did not want to be a trouble to either Mr. Stalvart or Mr. Jules, who had already been so kind to her. But Lem went with her; and Jules put another stick on the fire and sat down to think.

Lem was soon back. He said that he had chucked snowballs at the old people's bedroom window until a light was struck and then had hurried away, leaving the girl at the kitchen door. He explained that he had lacked heart to wait and speak to Peter Harlow. "I was ashamed," he said. "Think of me, Lem Stalvart, ashamed to face that low no-'count crook Peter Harlow! That's what Jeff's brought me down to."

After a long silence, which Lem employed in taking off his boots and coat and filling his pipe, Jules said, "She 'as wonderful eyes. Poor Jeff! It is sad to reflect zat 'e has no money left and is in danger of being disin'erited."

CHAPTER XX.

MISJUDGED.

JULES was not fooled for a moment, either that night or afterward—nor had he been before, for that matter. Never had Dora pulled the wool over his eyes even for an instant of time, a blink of the eyelids. But he did not underrate her power, realizing that it was fully equal to her heartlessness. He was not blind to her physical attractions, but he saw also her artfulness and was deeply impressed by her absolute disregard for the truth. A clever fellow was Jules—deep and sure, you understand; and yet a fool, and blind as an owl at noon, in matters most vitally affecting his own heart's welfare.

No mention was made of Dora's arrival during breakfast; and after breakfast, Jules shouldered his ax and set out alone, as usual. He had been at work for only an hour, and was limbing out a big golden-birch, when Lem walked in on him and sat down heavily on the butt of the prostrate tree. Jules worked on, shearing the mighty branches from the great bole with unhurried, unerring, irresistible swings of the heaviest ax in Victoria County. In his hands that formidable implement appeared to have no more weight than a walking-stick.

"I reckon we misjudged that there young woman," said Lem.

Jules paused in his work for a few seconds as if to consider this remark, then shortened his hold on the ax, trimmed several sprays of twigs out of his way with delicate exactness, then shifted his hold again and swung full-length and cut through a section of tough wood as thick as his fist as if it were cheese.

"I reckon we misjudged that there young woman," repeated the boss in a louder key.

Again Jules lowered his ax and relaxed his muscles; and this time he turned and faced his friend, who was not looking at him.

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"I fear I 'ave been guilty of the presumption of judging 'er, but I 'ave kept it to myself," he said. "In the case of Jeff I was not so wise, I regret to say. I 'ave spoken of Jeff as a fool and a coward, in the 'eat of anger and the madness of vanity. But of the young woman I 'ave kept silent. I make no judgment—zat is to say, I make none intentionally; and I refuse to be considered a judge; and so I do not admit the stupidity and guilt of 'aving judged or misjudged."

Lem looked at him then. "What the devil's eatin' you now?" he exclaimed. "What you talkin' about, anyhow? All I said was that we was wrong about Dora; an' there you go preachin' an' jawin' at me worse'n if it was me had lied and stole an' run away with a girl. All I said was, we was wrong about that young woman."

"Zat is all you said, Lem; and it is a great deal; and I 'ave said not a word, and I continue to say no more zan zat."

"I don't know what ye're drivin' at, Jules. If it wasn't that I know you as well as I do, I'd say you don't know yerself—for it sounds like nothin' but damn sloppy-brained foolishness to me."

Jules smiled. "Turn my words over in your mind, my dear Lem," he said gently; and then, moving forward a step, he resumed his work.

Lem resumed his contemplation of the trampled snow and chips at his feet, sitting with his elbows on his knees, his shoulders hunched and his head bowed. His brow was clouded. For fully ten minutes he remained thus silent and motionless; and then he sat up sharply and cried, "D'ye mean that we didn't misjudge her?"

Jules was quite a distance away by this time, among the top branches of the tree, but still within easy earshot; but he made no more sign of having heard than if he had been north in Restigouche County.

"If that's what you mean yer crazy!" cried Lem.

Jules stepped down into the snow, which took him in half-way to the hips, and topped-off the tree with four blows of his mighty ax. He did not even glance in the direction of his friend. Lem stood up and set out for the house in dignified silence. Jules continued his job of manufacturing cordwood, calmly, smoothly, efficiently.

The friends did not meet again until supper time. During supper, Lem told the Skellogs there assembled that Jeff's wife was home again, with nothing to show for her foolishness but a certificate of marriage. Mrs. Skellog looked embarrassed. Tom, who was nobody's fool, was on the point of remarking that perhaps a marriage certificate was the very thing she had eloped to get, when he caught Jules's eye, changed his mind and refrained from saying anything. The meal was continued and concluded in an awkward silence. Lem and Jules retired to their own sitting room, as usual. Jules set a match to the ready-laid kindlings between the fire-dogs and Lem sat down and gazed with a preoccupied air at the chess men, which were just as they had stood when Dora had turned the knob of the door last night.

"Your play," said Jules, taking his chair; and, ten minutes later, Lem was checkmated.

Lem sighed. "I can't put my mind onto it to-night" he said. "I felt bad enough before, knowin' him to be a lawbreaker and a thief—an' the way he treated that Griffou girl. That was bad enough, God knows—but the way he used Dora! I could die of shame for him! Guzzlin' liquor, lyin', runnin', loose round the city all night—an' never a stroke of work to earn an honest dollar for her!"

"She did not convey the impression to me of 'aving been stinted in the matter of 'er wardrobe," said Jules.

"What's a few clothes?" cried Lem. "Sure he'd buy her a few clothes, or let her buy 'em, for the sake of his own vanity."

"I believe you," returned Jules, setting up the chess men.

"Ye're hard," said the other. "It ain't like you, Jules. If I didn't suspect different I'd suspect that you was down on that unfortunate woman because ye'd been in love with her yerself. That's what it looks like. But why d'ye blame her for what happened? She was a fool to take a shine to Jeff—but she ain't the first. You misjudge her."

"I refuse to judge or misjudge anybody,"

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protested Jules. "I refuse to 'ave judgments put into my mout'. I say not a word."

After a long silence, during which Lem smoked his pipe and ignored Jules and the chessboard, and Jules advanced his king's pawn two squares and then sat and regarded his friend mildly, Lem arose suddenly and purposefully to his feet.

"I'm goin' up to Harlow's," he said challengingly. "Got to talk it over—this business. Can't set back an' have that old crook supportin' my son's wife, even if you don't approve of her. Come along if you want to, or stop to home if you don't. Ye're welcome, either way."

"I shall sit 'ere and read a book, if it is agreeable to you," said Jules. "I am but 'alf way into the story of the poor man who sold 'is wife and little baby to a sailor. I wonder if Mr. Tomas 'Ardy could make a great book of zis drama of Porcupine Brook, if 'e knew it."

"Drama? Damnation!" retorted Lem. "It would make a hell of a book to read, wouldn't it?—a book of shame!"

He left the room by the inner door, but was soon back in boots and overcoat and cap. With a hand on the knob of the other door, he turned.

"You ain't jealous, Jules?" he queried anxiously.

Jules lowered "The Mayor of Castlebridge" and stared.

"Jealous?" he asked. "Jealous of what, in God's name?"

"Of—this Dora; of what I might do for her—money to support her. It's my duty, plain as day—but it wouldn't take much."

"Oh, zat!" Jules laughed. "I begrudge no one anyt'ing, Lem—but even if you were to give away all you own, every dollar, it would not affect me—unless you reduced yourself to poverty and I 'ad to support you."

"But the offer still holds, Jules. Say the word, an' yer my son."

Jules went over and patted the boss on the back affectionately.

"I refuse to be adopted by so crazy a man," he said. "Now run along and talk over the affairs of shy little Dora wiz 'er dear good papa."

Three days later, Jules went to the village and found Jeff's desperate letter. He answered it then and there. He did not enclose a money order, as requested in the most urgent and glowing terms, but he advised Jeff to come home immediately and try to do something or show something to plant a hope—a seed of hope, no matter how small—in his father heart, that there still lay a spark of manhood, a grain of honesty, somewhere in his composition. And he informed him of Dora's arrival.

Upon his return to the farm, Jules did not mention either the letter received or the letter written, feeling that Lem had already had all the trouble he could attend to.

Jules had seen nothing of Dora since the night of her dramatic arrival; but Lem had visited the Harlow home twice and spoke strongly, almost belligerently, of the innocence and heartache of the poor girl. Jules let the boss talk, with a smile now and then, but never a yea or nay. He continued to go among his big trees every morning, ax on shoulder, and remain there all day trying to still a pain in his breast with muscular weariness. But his wonderful muscles refused to tire.

At noon of the fifth day after Dora's return from Montreal, Jules ceased work, pulled on his mackinaw coat and made a little fire of bark and dry twigs at which to boil his kettle. It was a bright and windless day, with just frost enough in the air and the snow to keep things snappy. Jules opened the bulky parcel from his pocket and spread his lunch neatly on the butt of a newly-felled maple — four large ham sandwiches, a chunk of yellow cheese, a wedge of apple pie and a slab of gingerbread big enough to slide down hill on. The little fire was in shadow, but the food was spread in a patch of sheer sunshine. Without waiting for the kettle to boil, he seated himself on a little pile of split wood, with his back to the fire, and reached for one of the sandwiches—and just then a shadow fell across his extended hand and rustic table. He turned his head and beheld an absolute stranger standing within a foot of his shoulder, with projected head, gazing hungrily at the food.

Jules withdrew his hand and stood up;

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and not until then did the stranger look at him.

"Sit down and join me," invited Jules, with a bow. "I was but now occupied wiz the sought zat I was in need of a guest. Mrs. Skellog is a too generous provider."

"Thanks," replied the stranger. "Glad to meet you, mate. You've got manners, whoever you are, wherever you got 'em from. Don't mind if I do—an' I'd mind like hell if I didn't."

"After you" said Jules, with a wave of a hand.

They sat down side by side on the little pile of cordwood, and the stranger grabbed a sandwich and tore out a mouthful that bulged his thin cheeks. He was in so much haste that he swallowed lumps which caused his head to jerk forward in their difficult passage down his throat. Jules felt alarmed for his safety, but was too polite to expostulate. But even the largest lump went down; and by the time Jules had finished one sandwich, the other three were gone and the stranger was still unchoked. The chunk of cheese followed those three sandwiches; but Jules managed to divide the pie with his jack-knife.

The stranger sighed and rubbed his front gently with both hands. He turned to Jules with tears in his eyes; and Jules did not know if they were tears of gratitude or simply a result of the physical strain to which he had but now subjected his head and entire swallowing apparatus.

"What about somethin' to drink," he asked in a faint but eager voice.

Equipped with the only mug, a large one of tin, he drank all of the tea, with the exception of one leafy and bitter swig which poor Jules drained from the bottom of the kettle.

CHAPTER XXI.

THROUGH THE STOVE-PIPE HOLES.

JULES rolled a cigarette for the stranger, then one for himself.

"You've got manners, wherever you got 'em from," said the stranger. "I got 'em myself—sometimes. I was hungry, mate. Maybe you noticed it?"

"A good appetite, zat is all," said Jules gravely.

"Well, it's a good thing your own wasn't so good, or somebody'd be hungry now," returned the other. He eyed Jules pleasantly enough but unsmilingly, and still with that look of craving. "My name's Wilson," he continued. "Tark Wilson."

Jules acknowledged this with a bow. "I am Jules d'Ance, at your service," he said, and, after a glance at the cigarette between the stranger's lips he set to work to roll another.

The stranger looked at once young and old. No not old at a closer glance. He suggested wear and tear rather than age. Thirty, or thirty-five at the outside, would number his years. He looked as if events had dealt more harshly with him than time. His week-old beard was carroty in hue, lifeless in sheen and texture, and thin. His face and hands and body and legs were all thin. His clothing was patched and darned and faded. His snowshoes, which he had been carrying under an arm upon his noiseless arrival, and which now leaned against the prostrate tree-trunk, were spliced of frame and bleached of web.

"Did you come up-stream?" asked Jules.

"Straight from the railroad, slam through the jungle," replied Wilson. "It was a rough passage. And them damn rackets! They was all the time foulin' each other. I was wrong-end-up half the time."

"You know zese woods, then?"

"Not on your life, mate. I set a course and sailed it, that's all." He accepted and lit the second cigarette. "I'm kind of lookin' for some one," he added, and let it go at that.

Jules waited politely for him to continue; but he continued to draw deeply at the cigarette and gaze around at the snow and the gray trees. The expression of his gray eyes and gaunt, straggly whiskered face was still hungry and eager and tinged with something between uncertainty and anxiety. He blew smoke down his nostrils into the sparse growth of his miserable mustache.

"You are looking for some one?" murmured Jules at last.

"Kinder—but I'm not sure," returned Wilson. "Not dead certain, mate. Kinder

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toyin' with the idee, so to speak. But it's brought me this far from anywhere—so I guess I may's well make port."

"You 'ave come a long journey?"

"You said it, mate. A long journey's right. A long v'yage. But that beat to win'ward from the railroad was the roughest leg of the whole entire journey. A sailor on snowshoes. If you'd sighted me, mate, you'd of swore it was a crazy porpoise an' got a throwin' iron ready."

This was evidently intentional humor; but he did not smile.

"A sailor," said Jules encouragingly. "One never meets mariners, nor even fishers of cods, in this region."

Wilson nodded his head. "I guess that's so," he said. "I'm out of place in these woods—you don't have to tell me—like a boson in church. I'm kinder keepin' an eye skinned for folks of the name of Harlow."

Jules felt a thrill, though he could think of no reason in particular for being thrilled by the fact of a sailor looking for the Harlows.

"T'ree of zem are at 'ome," he said. "The parents and the young lady. The son is still in the deep woods, if I am not mistaken."

"You are acquainted with 'em, mate?"

"Yes, we are acquainted. We are neighbors."

"Tell me, mate—them there parents, now—what kinder folks would they be for a man to live with—a man like me, for instance?"

"To live wiz? Peter and 'is *madame?* It is a question. It is a situation I 'ave never contemplated. To work for Peter and 'is *madame* would be very good, very friendly, I do not doubt—but zat family do no work."

"No work, hey? That suits me, mate. That sounds good to a sailor only six weeks outer hospital at Pernambuco. But I don't know. My mind ain't altogether made up yet. There's more'n one side to a custard pie; and I don't want to sign on in haste an' cuss myself out at leisure. It's a long hop, mate—from follerin' the sea to navigatin' these woods on them damn snowshoes. Let her ride."

Jules handed over his tobacco and cigarette papers and then fell to work. Tark Wilson sat and watched him, rolling and smoking cigarettes the while. The afternoon passed. The sun reddened as he neared the horizon and at last slipped out of sight in a smolder of gold and scarlet; and the east, eggshell green, disclosed a hundred stars like diamonds. The still air crisped with an increase of frost; frosty snappings rang out from the trees of the forest, far and near; and Jules ceased his labor and drew on his coat and mittens.

"Where do we go from here, mate?" queried the sailor.

Halfway to the house Wilson halted Jules with a pluck at an arm.

"About them Harlows, mate," he said. "I been considerin' it. Let it ride, that's the idee. Mum's the word. No hurry, you understand. No call to tell what I asked you, neither. My mind—I don't seem to be able to make it up. Sailin' the seas is one thing an' runnin' aground on these here woods is another. So I guess we'll let it ride, mate. Mum's the word."

"What is your exact wish in the matter?" asked Jules. "Perhaps I do not fully understand you. Be more explicit, if you please."

"It's this way. Never mind tellin' your friends what I asked you—how I asked you about folks of the name of Harlow. That's all. I come outer the woods an' belayed you for a job. Not a word about the name I told you, nor about me bein' a sailor. That last dose of fever kinder spoiled me for makin' up my mind. Call me Jones, mate—or Morgan—anything but Tark Wilson—till I make up my mind. An' about the job, mate. If your skipper will tell me off into your watch, to work along with you, I'd be obliged—an' I don't ask a cent more'n victuals an' smokes."

"It is your wish to lie low for a little while?"

"You said it, mate."

"Very well. I see no 'arm in it—as yet. But as you are an absolute stranger, and I am taking the responsibility of introducing you into my friend's 'ouse wizout disclosing to 'im your true name and vocation, I must warn you zat I shall keep a sharp eye on you."

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"That's all right, mate. No need for you to worry about me. I've had hard luck, an' I've had fever—but the worst thing that any man can say ag'in' me is that I can't make up my mind. Much obliged, mate."

Lem Stalvart received the stranger with a delicacy, a consideration of the poor fellow's sensibilities, almost equal to that of Jules. This was partly due to his natural kindliness and partly to preoccupation of mind. The Skellogs were only mildly and pleasantly curious. A chair was placed for the so-called Bill Morgan at the supper table. He performed with knife and fork and spoon and cup as if he had not as much as caught sight of Jules's luncheon. The little Skellogs beheld his performance with wonder and admiration and something of alarm in their round eyes. Down went fried pork and fried eggs in portions which marked the thin throat with sliding bulges; down went hot "riz" biscuits, well buttered—so well buttered as to cause scarce a ripple of the long surface of that lean gullet; down slid strawberry preserves and gingerbread and cookies and five cups of coffee. The little Skellogs had never seen, never dreamed of, such a table champion as the thin stranger.

After supper the stranger went with Lem and Jules to the sitting room, with a spare pipe of Lem's, stuffed with black tobacco, protruding from his sparse mustache. He carried his impoverished-looking pack along with him, and from it produced an accordion. He sagged in a deep chair beside the hearth with the accordion silent between his hands, while the friends set up the chess men and got to work. Presently he laid his pipe aside and began to play softly, no more than a hum and whisper of melody. Suddenly he broke into song. His speaking voice was nothing to write about; but when he sang you had to look at him to be sure that it was the same man. Trumpets, fifes and fiddles were in his singing. The men at the chess table forgot their game. Each propped an elbow on the table and shadowed his face with his hand. And the stranger, moving his hands before his lean middle with the singing accordion between them, and with thin fingers pressing and releasing silver keys, sang of slanting decks, of whistling winds, of skippers, of sea cooks, of mermaids, of sweethearts and harbor lights, of palm trees, of love and shipwreck and deep drinking and drowned comrades.

The stranger went to the woods with Jules next morning with an ax on his shoulder. He knew no more about handling an ax than a nun knows about shaking cocktails. But Jules showed him, and was very patient about it. He was not only ignorant, but weak as well. He sat down frequently. He displayed a good appetite at noon, however. He talked a good deal, told some astonishing stories of far seas and foreign ports, but made no further disclosures concerning his past or his mission to Porcupine Brook. He did not mention the Harlows that day.

At supper that evening Lem said: "Bill, I bet a dollar you know more about salt water nor ye do about spruce beer."

"I never drunk neither," replied the stranger. "What does spruce beer taste like?"

"That was a figure of speech," returned Lem. "Spruce beer ain't worth the trouble of swallerin'. What I mean is, I bet a dollar ye're a sailor. Nobody but a seafarin' man would have such a grist of songs about mermaids and bilge and the like. I never heared a concert to beat it—no, not even in the city of Quebec."

"Maybe that was where I learned 'em, skipper—at concerts an' them places. A man don't have to be a sailor to sing about ca'ms an' hurricanes any more'n he needs to be a soldier to recite you 'The Charge of the Light Brigade.'"

Lem smiled good-humoredly. "But there is other things about you, Bill," he said. "Take that there anchor on yer arm, for instance—but I ain't curious, mind ye."

The stranger pulled down the scanty wristband of his right sleeve.

"It don't matter one way or t'other to me, Bill, nor to any one else in this house, whether you was a sailor or a soldier," continued Lem. "So don't fret—so long's ye're honest an' intend to remain so."

"It's this way, sir," returned the stranger. "A sailor ashore—'way back in the

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woods—well, he feels kinder outer water. With that, an' one thing an' another, I'd just as lief folks didn't know you got a sailor workin' for you, skipper. I been in hospital. I—well—"

"That goes," said Lem kindly. "We be white men here, includin' Mrs. Skellog. If there's one thing can be said about yer face, Bill, it is that if it ain't honest it ain't nothin'. I never see an honester face, lad, nor a more harmless one. Soldier or sailor or lumberjack, no man could git himself in to mischief with a face like that."

"You said it, skipper. If it ever wrecked a home it would sure be my own—if I ever had one."

Tom Skellog laughed and the others smiled, but the stranger did not twitch so much as the ghost of a beginning of a smile.

The stranger showed improvement as an axman next day, and rested less frequently than on the day before and took more time to the chewing of his victuals.

What of Dills Mumphy and Louis Gerou? Louis left Mumphy's room and the boarding house and hung on and off outside, with an eye on the front door. He had not long to wait for the flabby gent who was inquiring after Jules Perdu, or d'Ance, or whatever the big buttinsky's name was. Together they passed through the village. Louis left Mumphy outside a rambling and dilapidated string of buildings which clung among rocks and big spruces between the road and the river, below the former and almost overhanging the latter, and disappeared for several minutes. Mumphy felt uneasy. He began to regret this adventure with the big bushwhacker. The dark shadows, the humped and overshot bulks of blackness disclosed and enlarged around him by glimmering veins of snow, and the hoarse and sobbing complaint of the swift water through the steaming vent of an air hole somewhere close in against the rugged bank, chilled his spirit and weighed on his courage. He fingered a small automatic pistol in a pocket of his fur-lined coat, and kept his eyes and ears strained. But nothing worse happened than the reappearance of Louis.

Two minutes later Mumphy was comfortably seated in a small room bright and warm with fireshine and lamplight. He had laid aside his overcoat—but not before he had transferred the pistol, with clever sleight-of-hand, to a side pocket of his inner coat. He had been introduced to and shaken hands with Mr. Paul Griffou, a small but piratical looking man with a black mustache coarse-haired as a horse's mane and shaped like a hay rake.

This was a private room. Louis, with his fur cap still on his head and pulled down to his ears, informed Mumphy that it was not every Jake and Pat and Pierre could sit in here. Not by a jugful. This room was reserved for Griffou's special, admired friends, and their friends. Mr. Griffou retired by way of an interior door. Mumphy and his new friend lit cigars from Mumphy's vest pocket. The door by which the proprietor had retired, opened, and admitted a beautiful young woman carrying a tray. On a tray stood a bottle and two glasses. This beauty was introduced to Mumphy as Griffou's daughter. Mumphy acknowledged the introduction by struggling to his feet and bowing. He was impressed as greatly by the expression of kindness and honesty in the girl's face and the frank innocence of her manner as by her beauty. Marcel placed the tray on a convenient corner of the table, stepped to the open stove, and added a stick to the blaze, then went to the door; and as she closed the door behind her she heard Louis say something about "dat strong feller, Jules Perdu."

The stove in the room of Paul Griffou's riverside house, in which Dills Mumphy and Louis Gerou drank their whisky, did not, at that time, stand where it had formerly stood. Years before, that stove had occupied a position at the other side of the room, sixteen feet away, and its pipe had crossed the ceiling of the room above before entering the chimney. It had been moved to its present place, against the chimney, for the improvement of the draft; but the hole in ceiling and floor, through which the pipe had formerly passed to the chamber above, remained.

Marcel went lightly upstairs, lightly

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along dusky, narrow, dusty halls, and at last into a little deserted room given over to rubbish and spiders. She closed the door without a sound. She knelt on the dusty floor and lifted a little square of board to one side, then crouched low and set an ear to the stovepipe hole. She learned, for the first time, that Louis Gerou knew the whereabouts of Jules—or that he had laid claim to that knowledge at least. He did not name it. He offered to name it for one hundred dollars, then for seventy-five dollars; and then, receiving nothing more substantial than evasions and mumbled protests from his companion, he offered to take Mumphy to Jules for the price of the railroad tickets. She wondered if he really knew, and if so how he had acquired the knowledge. Not from her, most assuredly. She had never mentioned the name of Jules or either of the Stalvarts or Porcupine Brook to any one. Her parents believed that she had been in Montreal, working in a store, during her absence from home. She heard, for the first time, that Louis Gerou had a grievance against Jules; and she learned the cause of it. Louis told it to his companion. He, Louis, doing a little business in liquor in small and handy containers through the lumber camps, had been caught by that damn old fool, Lem Stalvart, after Jeff and the other members of the gang were well lit and eager for more; and he would have made a clean get-away but for that pie-faced skunk, Jules What's 'Is Name, who had grabbed him when he was within half a jump of the door and damn near killed him. And Lem, the —— old dub, had taken him away and stuck him in jail.

It was evident to Marcel, crouched in the dust with an ear to the stovepipe hole, that Louis Gerou believed his companion to be a detective; and she adopted his belief. What else could he be? He was from the States, that was certain, and it was equally certain that he was from populous centers.

She heard the stranger ask questions of Louis. He seemed to be interested in the Stalvarts, too, but not so vitally as in Jules. And she heard Louis ask questions. Louis asked—this was after several rounds of whisky—what Mr. Mumphy wanted Jules for? Was it for a crime? What manner of crime?

"Was it murder?" asked Louis.

"D'ye see any green in my eye?" returned Mumphy.

"Don't be shy wid me, mister," said the bushwhacker. "I'll lead you to 'im; an' if you 'ang 'im by the neck, t'ree cheers, I says."

Marcel replaced the square of board over the stovepipe hole and stole silently from the cobwebby room and down the narrow stairs to where her mother sat knitting peacefully beside the big kitchen stove. She, too, had a piece of knitting, and she sat down in a rocking chair and went to work on it.

A black cat came out from behind the stove and jumped into her lap and coiled down contentedly. Her eyes were dropped to the clicking needles in her hands, and her brow was smooth; and Mme. Griffou, glancing across at her, was thankful that she was so well contented with her home. Little did *madame* suspect the thoughts at work behind that placid brow, the plans formed and considered, the startling decision made.

An hour later Marcel wished her mother good night and went upstairs. But she took a turn to the right and again stole into the deserted room and crouched, in the dark, above the hole in the dusty floor. Louis and the stranger were still there. They were still talking, but their voices had undergone a change for the worse. They seemed to be in perfect accord, however.

"To-morrow night 'll do," said Mumphy. "Save a long drive to the junction, you say. Good enough for me. What's it matter—one day more or less? Nothin'. That suits me. Bottle empty? Sure thing! Give yer friend a shout, Louis."

That was exactly what Marcel wanted to know. They did not intend to drive out to the junction and catch the seven o'clock train from there. But if she did so—and she could walk to the junction in less than four hours—she would have a twelve hours' lead on them.

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK

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The Fourth Circle

By ALBERT DORRINGTON

A BABEL of voices drifted from the fleet of pearling luggers, straddling across the six-fathom channel of the Ki Wi bank. There was no wind; the sea shone like grease paint where the helmeted divers bobbed up and down like goblins in a pantomime.

Norry Denham climbed from the cabin of his nine-ton lugger, Sea Witch, a small parcel of pearls in his hand. A slim, sea-browned girl of nineteen was standing at the rail, watching the black-billed hawks swooping over the tide-washed banks. She turned quickly at sight of the gems Norry held.

There were eighteen pearls in all, milk white stones, glistening with the matchless orient of the sea. They represented months of untiring labor along the coral-strewn floor of the channel, where death ran in the twisting currents and in the ghostly movements of giant stingrays and sharks.

"I'll ask six thousand dollars for them, Elean! They're worth ten thousand. But I'd like old Ty Foo to feel he's getting a bargain. His schooner's at Nadir Point. He's buying all the pinkies of the season!"

Elean had come from Sydney to spend a month with Norry on board the pretty, snow white lugger. They had been married a year, but owing to Norry's work on the banks she had found it necessary to live with her sister, a thousand miles away!

She drew him to the rail with a little sigh of pleasure. Translated into sterling, six thousand dollars seemed a colossal sum to her.

But Norry shook his head gloomily. After he had paid his divers and shell-openers, to say nothing of the storekeeper's account at Thursday Island, the six thousand dollars would begin to look like the price of a new hat and Elean's ticket home.

"What's the matter, grumps?" Elean laughed, running her fingers over the creases in his brow. "It's not so bad for a season's work! And it's better than hunting a job at a glue factory. And believe me, Norry, it nearly came to that last time you got left in the big town. And why

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not get a better price from this Mr. Chu Chin Chow or whatever his name is. They're lovely pearls, dear!" she added, holding them carefully to the light. "Ask another thousand. He'll feel just as good about it!"

Norry considered her words, but shook his head after a while. He wanted to please the old Chinese pearl buyer. Ty Foo was rich. Every roughneck schooner captain between Darwin and Sud Est was striving to please him. He bought shell at good prices. His godowns at Surabaya were filled with the trade of a thousand islands.

With the pearls stowed in the pocket of his twill coat, Norry kissed his wife and dropped lightly into the dinghy under the lugger's stern. The old Chinaman would be expecting him. The season was nearly over, and his own lugger hands had gone ashore earlier in the morning. Everybody wanted money, and there were Elean's bills in Sydney still unpaid!

II.

A MILE across the glittering straits of Torres lay Nadir Point. The morning was insufferably hot. The sun flared down from a sky of angry yellow. Not a breath moved over the oily, heat-flattened straits. Past the Pandora lightship Norry swung the dinghy round where the tide bore him without effort under the lowered gangway of the Plum Moon.

A number of lugger captains had called on the Chinese pearl buyer earlier in the day, but it was soon evident to Norry that little or no business had been done. White shellers were notoriously greedy and held off selling in the hope of scaring the pleasant voiced Ty Foo.

He received Norry with gestures of welcome in his silk upholstered buying room below. A man of full girth was Ty Foo in his jacket of blue shantung, his shining girdle of tooled leather and jade inlay. A merchant prince, Norry told himelf, with his nails burnished to the color of live opal.

"Ah, my dear Norry, you have been working all the tides!" he greeted in good English. "Sit down please and tell me about yourself. I like to hear that men are working hard. The sea is always kind to them. She repays in pearls and gold, in good health as she has repaid me!"

Norry sat in a high-backed chair, fascinated to the point of silence by the air of wealth and opulence that seemed to exude from the Chinaman's perfumed vestments. A Tonquinese boy appeared with two glasses and a gold-topped bottle of champagne. Ty Foo beamed on the young lugger captain.

"There is much heat in the sky, my dear Norry! Drink, and then talk. You will find me full of good will!"

Norry sipped his wine and coughed a trifle nervously. "Ive got a handful of pinkies to show you, Mr. Foo. I'm no salesman," he stated deprecatingly. "And there's no need to call your attention to a single stone. Eighteen in all. Got 'em out of six-inch shells mostly, that drift of of black-lip I worked off Monday Reef!"

The Chinaman raised the pearls one by one from the table, his big, bland face expressing the keen interest of the expert.

"They are very fine," he said at last. "I am glad some one on the banks is finding his luck! How much, my dear Norry?"

Denham sat tight in his chair. "Six thousand dollars, Mr. Foo! Not a penny less!" In spite of the fact that he was asking considerably less than their market value, his voice trembled slightly.

"Six thousand dollars!" The Chinaman rolled the pearls skillfully in the palm of his fat hand, while a silence sharp as the reef points, spaced his next words.

"Very well; I will make it six!" At a glance he knew their value. But it was no part of his creed to force up prices. He was aware that men courted his good will, for when bad seasons came he remembered their unselfish dealings.

"Six thousand dollars!"

"Check to bearer," Norry prompted, sipping the cool wine.

Ty Foo nodded briskly as he reached for his checkbook on the desk beside him. Very slowly and with an obvious effort he drew up the amount. Attaching his sprawling signature, he blotted it carefully and then passed the check to the young pearling master.

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Norry glanced at the check before placing it in his pocket. He noted the ultra violet hue of the ink used by the old pearl buyer.

"I'll give you a receipt now, Mr. Foo!" he said quickly as he drew out his fountain pen and a stamp.

Just here he discovered that the pen was dry. In the twist of a thumb he had helped himself to some ink from the stand on the table. In a few moments he had passed the receipt to the smiling Chinaman.

Ty Foo followed him upstairs to the gangway, shook his hand cordially, begging Norry to be sure to let him have all his business in future.

III.

NORRY pulled slowly toward Thursday Island, his mind in a ferment, his nerves on the leap. He was thinking of Elean and the coming winter when the lugger would have to lie up for months. To-morrow he would divide the profits of the season with his crew. They were good fellows and comrades, and in need of every shilling. He would see that they got their just dues.

Elean was different. She had been accustomed to a refined home before her marriage, servants and a runabout car, theaters, and hosts of friends. She had surrendered all these to share his somewhat doubtful future. He had believed there were unlimited earnings in the pearling industry, only to discover a succession of unlimited risks.

Yet this wisp of girlhood had shown only smiles and letters of encouragement when his overdue remittances reached her in Sydney. He writhed at the thought of the paltry economies daily inflicted on her. She had traveled to him as a steerage passenger in an old coastal steamer to save a few pounds. In all probability she would return steerage, unless—

He pulled the dinghy under the pier, at Victoria Parade. It was lunch hour and the pier itself was almost deserted except for a solitary customs official and a couple of trepang fishers, throwing dice in the shade.

He sat on the steps of the pier, out of sight of the crowded Parade, and scanned the Chinaman's check hastily. He saw that Ty Foo had left the usual half-inch space between the written words *six thousand dollars.*

Denham took out his fountain pen and wrote the letters "ty" after six. The task of adding a naught to the figures in the check was simple enough. A scrap of blotting paper he carried in his pocket put the right shade on the added letters and figure.

The Bank of South China was at the far end of the Parade. The cashier was an Englishman named Gibbs. Norry was well known to Gibbs. The young pearling master had been in the habit of bringing Ty Foo's checks to the grille and getting them cashed. There had never been any trouble, and Gibbs had acquired the habit of expecting Denham and the Chinaman's check, every month.

Between the pier and the bank Norry had leisure to dwell on Ty Foo as a possible enemy. No man in the Straits had ever caught the Chinaman without his smile. Smiling was his strong card.

But Norry Denham had looked beyond Ty Foo's display of gold filled teeth, had probed the eternal twinkle in the almond eyes. And what he had seen filled him with doubts and forebodings—

Norry set aside his qualms as he neared the bank. After all, Ty Foo was just a lucky Chinaman, nothing more. His luck had never failed him, and he would hardly feel the loss of the money that was destined to open the gates of a new heaven and earth for Elean!

A few customers moved in and out the bank, lugger and schooner captains drawing funds for stores and gear. At this time of the year large sums were needed daily to meet the demands of the Japanese shell companies and copra buyers.

Gibbs favored Norry with a slight nod as he entered the bank. Gibbs was forty and afflicted with insomnia. The heat and mosquitoes had soured his genial temperament, but not his capacity for scrutinizing a signature.

"'Morning, Captain Denham!" he murmured, closing the till and reaching for the check. "Beastly hot, eh?"

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"I like the heat," Norry affirmed, leaning against the counter. "It's the wind upsets me!"

A tiny frown crossed the cashier's brow. He straightened his lean shoulders like one about to bat a ball, the check flattened out before him on the counter.

"Sixty thousand dollars!" he gasped. "Jerusalem! You've been selling some pearls to Mr. Foo, if I may say it!"

"There's no harm in saying it," Norry told him steadily. "There might be, though," he added as an afterthought, "if I'd been selling him flatirons or water liles, Mr. Gibbs! But just now I happen to be in the pearl business, and I assume that Ty Foo is in a position to buy up to a million pounds' worth when the fit takes him."

There was a snap in Norry's voice, a subtle challenge that brought the cashier round with a wan smirk on his nerve-ridden face.

"It's a large amount, Mr. Denham!" he stated sweetly. "To be quite frank, it's more than I have in bills or cash at the moment!"

"How long will it take you to get the cash?" Norry inquired without haste. "I'm mailing a deposit on a seventy-ton schooner I've bought at Surabaya!"

"I'll get it in an hour, Mr. Denham! Sorry to make you wait. Perhaps—"

"I'll call in an hour," Norry interrupted from the entrance. "Dollars or sterling; I'm not particular."

Norry strolled back to the pier, out of sight of the cashier's pursuing glances. He wiped his hot face and stared across the bay in the direction of Nadir Point. Ty Foo's schooner was a mile away, on the heels of the outstraddling lugger fleets.

He felt certain that Gibbs would not attempt to communicate with the Chinese pearl buyer. The check had been passed for payment. In an hour the money would be ready for collection. If there had existed a shadow of suspicion in the cashier's mind concerning the check, he would have referred it at once to the Chinaman!

Norry breathed like a boxer emerging from the first round in a stiff encounter. The next round would be easier, he told himself, unless Gibbs got drunk or the bank's messenger fell down with the money.

Phew! How hot it was!

Norry turned again to the lugger fleets across the bay. The tide had swung the Plum Moon stern on to the shore. To his horror he observed a boat pull away from the gangway. Seated at the tiller was the familiar outline of the Chinese pearl buyer.

Norry realized instantly that Ty Foo was coming ashore. It was almost certain that he would go into the bank, and at the very moment Gibbs was busy arranging to pay out the sixty thousand dollars!

Denham sat like a frozen image as the boat with the Chinaman on board reached the steps at the end of the pier.

IV.

An almost childish desire to run away took hold of Norry as Ty Foo clambered from the boat and came swiftly along the pier. For one dizzy instant the fear of the stone jail at Shark Island beat through Denham's young mind, as the eyes of the bright faced Chinaman settled on him.

"Ah, my dear Norry!" he called out, his whalelike girth heaving after his climb up the steps. "I am going to a friend's house to eat. I had almost forgotten the appointment. Then I have some business at the bank! There is always a rush for money at this time of the year, eh?"

Norry's face was wet with the terror that drains men white. He forced himself into a smiling attitude, scarce daring to speak. He felt that the sound of his voice would betray him. He glanced at his watch to cover his mental torment. Then he scanned the fierce yellow streaks breaking across the northern sky.

"More heat, Mr. Foo!" he predicted at random. "I'm expecting to meet my sailmaker, Evans," he blurted out, scarce knowing what to say. "Lost most of my canvas last month!"

Ty Foo gestured cheerily. His face was wreathed in smiles as he passed down the pier. At the Parade he turned almost sharply in the direction of the bank, as though urged by an overwhelming impulse to see Gibbs. At the last moment he seemed to change his mind, and passed on to the lower part of the town.

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Norry writhed in his agony; sweat dripped from his face as he saw the Chinaman pass on. Fifty seconds later he observed the stooping figure of the old bank messenger emerge from a side street carrying a black bag. The bag was chained to his wrist.

"He's got the cash!" Norry choked as the messenger hobbled into the bank.

The young pearling master checked an impulse to hurry forward and collect the money from Gibbs. Ty Foo's movements were too uncertain. At any moment he might appear outside the bank. Yet Denham forced himself to remain inactive. One false movement on his part might turn Gibbs's attention to the police.

Up and down the pier he snailed, staring blindly at the water, the schooners across the straits, at his watch until his brain grew sick and the tension of waiting threatened to smash his nerve.

Gibbs was reading a week-old newspaper when he entered the bank. But Gibbs had witnessed the brief interview with Norry and Ty Foo. To him the talk had seemed full of smiles and pleasant understandings. Any feeling of suspicion that had lurked in his mind was dispelled.

"Hello, Mr. Denham!" he called out cheerfully. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Please indorse the check. I'll pay you the cash."

Denham wrote his name on the back of the Chinaman's check, whistled airily as he counted the pile of bills before him, separated them into hundreds and fifties, snapped an elastic band over them, and with a brief nod to the cashier left the bank.

Once outside he walked briskly in the direction of the pier. His plans were made. He would post money bills now to each of his lugger hands at their bungalows on Barren Head, where they lived with their families while ashore. He would give them a surprise in the way of an extra five hundred dollars each. They had wives and families, and the struggle to feed women and babies during the off season was pretty fierce.

Then he would go aboard his own vessel and tell Elean to make ready for a pleasant little trip to Port Darwin. With a couple of Manila boys they could make the crossing in a few days. The Sea Witch was the best little craft on the banks.

He turned the corner of the busy Parade and collided with the fast moving Ty Foo. The big pearl buyer was in a violent hurry. He paused only to emit a passing word.

"Sorry, my dear boy! I'm all out in my appointments. The bank shuts at three, eh? I'll see you soon!" He was gone in the fetch of a breath.

Norry stood rooted, then swung round in time to see the whalelike figure of the Chinaman disappear through the wide open doors of the bank.

"And that's that!" Norry declared under his breath as he fanned his burning cheek with his cap. It would take Gibbs about twenty seconds to lift the veil for the hard breathing Ty Foo. After that the deluge!

The big Chinaman would walk straight to the police commissioner's office, the receipt for six thousand dollars in one hand and the check for sixty thousand in the other!

Norry's thoughts flashed back to the stories he had heard of the convict gangs at the island prison, and how they welcomed new arrivals in their midst.

The next moment a soft blast of wind whirled a cloud of dead leaves into his face. A sulphur hued bank of clouds was sweeping over the island, piled up masses of wind and steam from the hot, monsoon lands in the north.

Before Denham had gained the pier steps a thunderous rush of air had struck the town, scattering lean-to sheds and houses across the deserted thoroughfares. A green wall of water rose from the levels of the heat-whitened skyline and broke in squadrons of foam along the beaches.

In that moment of screaming wind and shouting voices, he saw the bulging figure of Ty Foo scurrying toward a powerful steam tug lying in the shelter of the bay. It belonged to one of his compradores and was hurricane proof fore and aft.

Into this the big Chinaman scrambled, followed by a dozen Malays and Tonquinese sailors. Lying flat on the rocking, gale-swept pier, Norry saw the tug move out into the mountainous slopes of brine. Her en-

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gines slammed her through and over the avalanches of foam and spray. At a glance Norry saw that she was making for the Plum Moon off Nadir Point.

The wind burst over Denham like blasts of artillery. It rocked the pier to its foundations. Through the smothering whirl of sand and beach litter, he made out a few luggers laboring in the hell-broth of surf and shoal water along the banks.

His dinghy had been pulped to match wood against the iron wood piles below. Nothing could live in such a torment of wind and fury. Foot by foot he fought his way from the pier, the seas breaking in long, murderous swells at each step. The wind tore him from every coign of vantage, blew him like a bundle of rags across the Parade.

It was here the bamboo slatted roof of Chi Hi Lee's vegetable emporium planed down and buried Denham's struggling shape in a ton of dèbris and Chinese ceiling ornaments.

V.

Norry woke with the sound of wind still in his ears. He seemed to have lain unconscious for hours with the ribs of the bamboo roof swaying and breaking above him. His shoulder hurt from the effects of the crash. With difficulty he crawled from his cave of slats and hessian roof lining and looked out.

The beaches were strewn with spars and the wreckage of strange praus and schooners, blown from their island harbors and buoys. From one of a dozen uprooted gaming houses on the Parade came the melancholy howling of a dog.

Denham crawled to the beach, his limbs grown numb, his brain sick. He was one of a few that remained to grieve over the havoc of the hurricane. His yearling lugger had gone the way of others. Nothing could have saved Elean. Without a single seaman on board, the Sea Witch could only drown like a kitten in a well!

Norry's fingers dug into the soft sand. His face had become a twisted agony. How could he meet the future without Elean? For her he had been ready to sell his life, his liberty. He had been ready to betray everything he held dear, if only her happiness were assured!

He lay in the warm sand, a craving for death in his eyes. He heard the faint voices of men searching among the ruins of the town. A police patrol passed in the direction of the bank. He fell into a stupor and emerged with the chill of night in his blood.

He fought to his feet and glared around. One or two lights showed along the Parade. People were searching among the wreckage on the beach. The police were guarding the three banks in the town. Looters were abroad. Two men had been shot while attempting to enter the strong room of the Bank of South China.

Eight luggers had gone down; others were missing. He had taken a chance leaving Elean alone on the Sea Witch. Fate in the guise of a hurricane had struck swiftly and savagely. That was all! His pockets bulged with money. But—his heart was in the grave.

He crouched in the warm darkness of a deserted store, the sparkle of life gone from his mind. At dawn the wind died and the sea quieted. Rain blew out of the west and the air felt sweeter.

He joined the small crowd of searchers along the beach. His distracted eye fell on Gibbs leaning over the wave-smashed pier rail. The cashier hailed him dejectedly.

"Man—you were lucky yesterday!" he greeted dourly. "The bank has suspended payment! Our directors in Canton have been fooling with the revolutionaries—squandering the bank's funds in military enterprises! God—it's awful!" he wailed. "Yesterday's storm seems to have cut a track through most of our plantation properties in the north. We're smashed!"

He raised his nerveless face to Denham and grinned oddly. "When I told Ty Foo, yesterday, that you'd drawn the whole of the sixty thousand he looked a bit worried!"

"What did he say?" Norry inquired, dully.

"What could he say? It was his check and he owed you the money! And to be quite frank it was all the coin he had with us! Not so rich as people think! Without a word he bolted from the bank and ran

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right into the storm! Hell of a hurry to get aboard his schooner! I'd have stayed ashore. But you never know what's in the mind of a Chinaman!"

Denham walked away to avoid further parley. It occurred to him that the storm had temporarily paralyzed the Chinaman's wits. But where was he now?

The voice of Bill Lane, an old pearler, snapped on the morning air. His big hand fell with a slap on Norry's shoulder.

"Where you been, lad? Ain't you heard?" he demanded in rough but kindly tones. "That little old girl of yours was picked up safe an' plucky yesterday. She was at the wheel, holdin' the Witch up to the hell smother! Old Ty Foo's tug butted in when it looked as if David Jones was going to get her!"

"Ty Foo picked up Elean!" Norry's voice cracked, but the warm blood leaped to his cheeks.

"I guess there was no one else afloat to do it!" Lane told him quietly. "That old Chinaman fought through weather that would have bent an ironclad. He's got your little woman safe and trim, lad. Your lugger's on the beach, none the worse for it either!"

A pause followed. Then Lane, noticing the young pearling master's agitation, drew him towards the pier steps.

"I got a bit of a launch over here. I reckon you'd like to see your wife! You helped me wunct, an' by the holy I'll stand by you now, lad!"

Norry followed him blindly to the launch, clambered aboard with stiffly groping hands. He almost missed his footing and would have fallen but for Lane's friendly grip on his arm.

"Steady, lad! I know how it feels to have your little girl back from the dead! Easy does it! And don't forget the old Chinaman next time you're at prayers!"

One thought flared in Norry's brain as the launch worried through the storm swell toward Nadir Point. The Chinaman had him at his mercy. And after what had happened the mercy would be applied in a way known to Chinamen and timber wolves!

All the ghastly tales he had heard of Chinese devilry assailed him now. Yet—he must go to his crucifixion if need be. He could not leave Elean in the hands of these yellow men!

The launch swung under the bows of the Plum Moon. The big trading schooner appeared none the worse for her fight with the wind and sea. A cable's length away rode the big tug, her crew alert and watching Denham's approach.

Lane steadied the launch and called out to Norry as he clambered up the gangway, "I'll stand by, lad! There's no hurry. Plenty of calm here!"

A terrible silence struck Norry as he reached the deck of the Plum Moon. Not a hand showed on the poop or cabin stairs. He recalled in a flash the story of the providore's wife, decoyed aboard a Chinaman's yacht in the Samarang Roads.

The providore had robbed and cheated the Chinaman. True to his nature the Celestial had bided his time. Then, one day, under the guns of a patrolling destroyer, he had kidnaped the white man's wife. Months afterward they found her on the beach at Apia, her speech and memory gone!

Norry stood at the cabin stairhead, the stark silence gripping him by the hair. Where was Elean? Where was the Chinaman who had dragged her from the shoals of death?

VI.

From the ghostly silence of the cabin below came the shuffling of sandaled feet on the polished teak floor. The voice of Ty Foo came up through the open door.

"Your husband is safe, Mrs. Denham! He is now on his way to this schooner! Even now I hear his steps on the gangway. How can I repay him for his noble efforts on my behalf?"

"What has he done?" It was Elean's voice, pleading and tremulous after her recent experiences.

The Chinaman ceased his shufflings to and fro. His words touched Norry like whip strokes.

"He has done everything for me to avert misery and ruin. Yesterday, before the great storm fell upon us, he took my check for six thousand dollars to the bank.

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Some one must have whispered in his ear the story of the bank's difficulties, its coming suspension. He realized there was no time to warn me, for at any moment the wireless might order Gibbs to shut the bank's doors. So your husband did a noble thing on my behalf!"

"Tell me," Elean pleaded in a hushed voice.

"It was simple, Mrs. Denham. Your husband altered the check from six to sixty thousand dollars. Gibbs paid him the money an hour before the news of the bank's ruin was being broadcast from Canton!"

A sigh of relief came from Elean.

The big Chinaman laughed loudly as he resumed his pacings to and fro. "It is written that good deeds shall save men from the everlasting wrath!" he intoned. "There is always the choice of heaven or hell! Only the fool—"

"Ahoy, there!" Norry called from the cabin stairs. "I'm coming along!"

Elean's arms were about him as he stumbled forward across the polished floor of the cabin. Norry recovered himself, straightened his shoulders as he turned to the big browed Celestial.

"By Jove! I was just in time to lift your capital from that bucket shop on the Parade, Mr. Foo!" he exclaimed, dropping the pile of money bills on the table. "Only just in time!"

Elean laughed excitedly as she patted his shoulder affectionately. Norry was always the victim of brain waves! Imagine him forging a friend's check to beat a bank before it flopped! Good old Norry!

Ty Foo raised the bills slowly from the table, counted a number to the value of twenty thousand, and squeezed them into Elean's hand.

"I am very superstitious!" he confided seriously. "It was foretold in the calendar that yesterday was to be the period of my humiliation. I was born under the Sixth star of the Fourth circle. And, you see, now," he added with infinite tenderness, "that by putting the fourth circle on my check Norry has saved me from disaster and ruin!"

Elean looked quickly into the big Chinaman's face, into his smiling eyes that revealed the sunshine of his open nature.

Norry's voice sounded steadier now.

"We'll find our lugger Elean!" he said, drawing her to the cabin stairs. "She's safe on the beach!"

Elean kissed him tenderly and it was then she noticed the sudden flush of a tear on his cheek.

"Silly boy!" she chided with an unaccustomed tremor in her voice. "But we're safe!" she added when they reached the stairhead. "And—oh, Norry, it must never happen again!"

He wiped the moist agony from his brow, drew in a breath of clean air from the cooling sky. "It won't—never happen again, dear! My God!" he added under his breath. "Only a Chinaman could have passed it off like that!"

"Passed it off." Elean regarded him in silent commiseration for several moments. "Ty Foo believes every word of it," she declared with a final breath of relief.

THE END

"ABIE'S IRISH ROSE"

has broken all American play records for length of run, having recently entered upon its fourth consecutive year on Broadway.

ANNE NICHOLS

its author and producer, has purchased "White Collars," based on the ARGOSY-ALLSTORY serial, "Regular People," by Edgar Franklin, and has established it at the Sam H. Harris Theater, New York, where "The Nervous Wreck," (another ARGOSY story), had its all season run two years ago.

EDGAR FRANKLIN

has just completed another fine comedy serial which will start in this magazine within a few weeks. Watch for it. Further particulars later.

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Mr. Monfrent's Foursome

By JAMES KEVIN McGUINNESS

MR. ARTHUR MONFRENT, SR., was the Nathan Hale of golf, his sole regret being that he had but one life to give to his country club.

He sat, of a lovely March evening, on the deserted veranda of the Rockledge House, contemplating the niceties and the disappointments of mashie play. The younger set had flocked to a dance at Cocoa, a mile away, leaving the wide, shadowed spaces overlooking the shimmering Indian River to Mr. Monfrent's unfamiliar guardianship.

He gazed languidly across at Merrit Island, his eyes following the silver pathway of moonbeams to the tufted silhouettes of palm trees on the other shore. But the Floridian scenery held no arresting beauty for him. His mental vision was much more acute than his physical sight, and this former was concerned with picturing a gentleman of about forty-eight years pitching a beautiful approach shot over towering hazards to within three feet of the pin. Since the hero of the exploit was Mr. Monfrent, himself, nature could construct no scenic charms so alluring as this.

"Good evening," said a soft voice. Mr. Monfrent did not turn until the mashie pitch he had just made—mentally—trickled leisurely toward the green and—yes, by George!—flopped in. A three! A birdie three!

"Glorious evening, Mrs. Gerhard," he greeted, scarcely resenting her presence. Had he not been thinking of golf, her appearance would have been positively welcome. He drew up a wicker chair for her.

It was odd that they should have run across each other in Rockledge. Mr. Monfrent had chosen the town for his winter sojourn because it was not as yet a haunt for vacationists. In Nassau, or Havana, or Palm Beach, or Miami, he would have en-

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countered a host of people he knew. He planned to avoid them, for social niceties might have interfered with the grim purpose of his present Southern stay—the mastery of approach shots.

Hang it all, he could get distance off the tee with any man his years, and his drives were usually straight. It was as he neared the greens that he got into difficulty. Threw away stroke after stroke, halving innumerable holes he should have won.

But for his rotten short game, Arthur, Jr., and he would have beaten Jerry Phillips and his son two years ago in the Father and Son at Pinehurst; and at Garden City last fall.

Something had to be done about it, particularly since Mr. Monfrent's extended missionary work among the members of his home club had borne fruit at last. The new eighteen-hole course at South Fairfield, Connecticut, would be opened officially in the spring with a Father and Son tournament. Jerry Phillips and young Joe would enter, of course. Couldn't let them win on his home links. Phillips would spend the rest of his life crowing.

Rockledge had permitted him the time for practice he had anticipated. The one person of his acquaintance he encountered there was Mrs. Gerhard. He remembered her slightly. Seen her once, or twice at the old Fairfield Country Club. A widow. Her husband had been an army officer. Well-to-do in her own right. Charming home, people agreed. He knew the place.

She had chosen Rockledge for much the same reasons he had. Wanted to rest, to escape from social duties for a few months, she said. No, she didn't intend to play golf. Yes, he had seen her on the links occasionally, but she hoped he hadn't observed her game. He hadn't. He presumed from her tone that it was terrible. However, he did not say so—in words.

"Arthur run off to the dance?" Mrs. Gerhard inquired lightly.

"Do him good," Mr. Monfrent answered this inquiry about his son. The boy's golf has gone to pieces," he confessed. "Been off for a week now."

"Perhaps he's in love," the lady suggested, with just the faintest sigh.

Mr. Monfrent snorted. Being a widower, he was privileged to snort—even at the mention of love. "Good Godfrey, no!" he scoffed. "Whatever would he want to fall in love for?"

The friendly shadows hid Mrs. Gerhard's hovering smile as she replied, gently, "Young men *do* marry, you know."

"Arthur's only twenty-three," his father said. Then, sensing the weakness of his rebuttal, he added: "Boy who can shoot eighteen holes in seventy-eight's got no right getting married. He owes it to his game to stay single."

The lady chose to ignore this appraisal of what constituted a young man's duty to society. "There wouldn't be anything else on his mind?" she pondered, communing with herself rather than with her companion.

"He's been talking about going to work," Mr. Monfrent admitted. "Asinine idea. No need for it. He ought to get rid of that notion and go after his golf seriously. Wastes his gifts for the game."

"Ah! These young people!" sighed Mrs. Gerhard. "They never know when they are well off."

"My exact words to him," exclaimed the father, struck by this odd circumstance. "Told him exactly that."

"They are so desperately intent on independence," said the lady sympathetically. My niece has the same notion. I told her independence meant only loneliness for a woman"—a faint sigh—"but she would not heed. She went off to New York three years ago to do something, or other—designing, I believe. It is all I can do to get her away from her work for occasional week-ends in summer."

"I don't know what the world is coming to," confessed Mr. Monfrent.

"What, indeed?" murmured Mrs. Gerhard.

He enjoyed the evening thoroughly, reflecting that he must see more of the widowed lady in future. He was almost loath to say good night when eleven o'clock came around. But he did. Mr. Monfrent knew his duty. A man owes to his golf at least adherence to a regular schedule for retiring and rising.

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Mrs. Gerhard must have enjoyed the chat, too. After he had gone, she drew a silken shawl about her comely shoulders and gazed at the river shadows, now pointing to the farther shore. On her face was a smile; a dreamy, contemplative smile.

II.

MR. MONFRENT returned to South Fairfield early in April, according to his custom, in order to dominate the annual meeting of the directors of the Monfrent Hat Co.

The usual program for his directors was: come to order; vote "aye" as indicated; authorize the customary dividend; adopt a resolution congratulating the management; adjourn. There was a slight hitch during the present assemblage. George Perry asked a question. Apologetically enough, it is true, but a question, nevertheless.

"What progress did the new ladies' hat department make during the year?" he inquired.

Mr. Monfrent answered incisively. "It lost seventy-eight thousand dollars."

"Might I ask if the president has any theory as to why that department lost money?"

"Because it had a rotten designer," Mr. Monfrent blandly informed the questioner. "I've been trying to get a good one."

The meeting immediately resumed its orthodoxy. No more questions were asked. Despite the new department's deficit, the older sections of the hat factory returned substantial profits. A dividend was voted.

Yet the deviation from routine annoyed Mr. Monfrent for a week after the meeting. His directors were not supposed to ask questions. Devil of a nuisance having them taking interrogative bites at the hand that fed them.

He determined, after days of cogitation, to settle at once the matter of a new designer. A young lady had been recommended to him. Highly spoken of by several of his best customers. Summoning his secretary, he dictated a letter.

"I don't know what your present salary is, but I will pay you five thousand a year more, if an interview confirms what I have heard about you," it concluded.

An answer came the first of the following week.

"I am not interested in making a new connection at present. Thank you for having considered me."

It was signed "Aileen Marley."

Mr. Monfrent's private secretary laid the letter timidly on his broad desk for perusal and withdrew discreetly into her next door shelter until such time as the inevitable storm should subside.

This was a bad moment for Arthur Monfrent, Jr., to choose for the renewal of his offensive for a start in business. The secretary bluntly told him as much, but he ignored the warning and entered his father's office.

"What the devil is the world coming to?" Mr. Monfrent demanded as his son appeared. He had just finished reading Miss Marley's letter.

Arthur ignored the question about the ultimate destination of the universe. "Look here, dad," he began.

"Well?" the older man prompted ominously.

"Well, it's this," said the son, hesitantly, "I've decided if you won't give me a start in business I'm going to give up golf."

"Give up golf?" Mr. Monfrent demanded when the force of gravity finally pulled him back into his chair. "Give up golf?"

"Quit!" said Arthur flatly.

Mr. Monfrent sprang agitatedly to his feet and paced furiously about his desk, peevishly kicking at an inoffensive copper waste-basket in his path. The ultimatum stunned him. It was even more unorthodox than George Perry's question during the directors' meeting.

What, Mr. Monfrent wondered, was the world coming to? But he did not voice this favorite sentiment in so many words. What he did say, in awesome tone, was, "Give up golf?"

His son nodded gravely. Then, fearing that his father might not have seen this affirmation, he spoke. "If you don't give me a job, I quit golf."

And the opening of the Father and Son tournament was only a fortnight away, Mr. Monfrent thought with horrible sinking of

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heart. Jerry Phillips was coming up over the week-end so that he might go round the course a few times. That old pirate. How he'd gloat over a withdrawal. And just when he was going well with the mashie, too.

"Quit right away?" asked Mr. Monfrent, wishing to know the worst.

"This minute," his son assured him.

Mr. Monfrent resumed his agitated pacing until he reached a decision. Then he stopped abruptly.

"If you quit golf, I'll disinherit you," he announced sternly. "Cut you off without a cent."

"Fair enough," the son assented, blandly, and left the office.

Observing Arthur's hurried exit, Mr. Monfrent's secretary decided the best thing for her was to contract a sick headache at once.

III.

"Don't worry, my dear boy. Your father will come around," Mrs. Gerhard comfortingly assured Arthur. "He's the sort of man who resents change of any sort. He wants everything as it always has been." She smiled encouragingly. "However, when the change has been made, it becomes a settled matter with him. He'd oppose any attempt to change it back again."

Arthur shook his head at this.

"He seemed pretty hard hit," he commented dubiously. "He's all wrapped up in winning the Father and Son, but if we do win this one, he'll be all wrapped up in the next. He'll keep me going until the caddy has to wheel him around the links in an invalid's chair."

"I hesitate to offer such seemingly treacherous advice," said Mrs. Gerhard, "but it is my opinion it is best for you to raise one big crisis now, and have everything settled—everything. It will be easier for your father."

"I suppose so," Arthur assented, rising. "Dad's hard to handle," he added. "Mother died when I was a tot, and he's had everything his own way since. Do him good to have a woman boss him around some."

"It might," smiled Mrs. Gerhard, following Arthur to the door. And when he had gone, she mused again, "It might."

The diminishing whir of Arthur's roadster had scarcely droned around the next corner when Mr. Monfrent's limousine drew up before Mrs. Gerhard's home.

"Providential for me you were called back to Fairfield" said Mr. Monfrent after the formalities of greeting were concluded and he was seated in the spacious living room. "Need a woman's advice, and you're the only sensible woman I know."

"My trustees," murmured the lady, referring to his opening statement about her recall.

"That business finished?"

"Almost."

"Hum!" Mr. Monfrent shifted himself into a more comfortable position in his chair. "Wanted to consult you about Arthur," he said.

"Has he been getting into trouble?"

"No! Of course not. Worse; much worse."

"Dear, oh, dear," commented Mrs. Gerhard non-committally.

"Wants to quit golf."

"Ghastly" breathed Mrs. Gerhard sympathetically. "Why?"

"That fool idea of his that he wants to go to work."

"Wouldn't it perhaps be easier for you to yield a trifle?" the lady advised. "Put him to work in your own office. You could arrange all the time he needs for golf."

This suggestion impressed Mr. Monfrent.

"Good hunch," he commended. 'I'll do it. You know, Mrs. Gerhard," he added, rising, "the boy is stubborn. His mother died when he was quite young and he's had his own way pretty much ever since. He's missed being bossed about some by a woman."

"I suppose," the conciliator agreed, and after Mr. Monfrent was gone she mused again, "I suppose."

Next morning, at breakfast, Mr. Monfrent announced to Arthur that he would put him to work in his own office.

"What am I going to do?" asked the son.

"Nothing, I hope," said Mr. Monfrent fervently, his mind leaping ahead to afternoons of practice in preparation for the approaching tournament.

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"No bet," Arthur demurred. "A job with work attached or nothing."

Mr. Monfrent was tempted to make an issue, to scotch this sedition in embryo, but fear for the effect on his son's game held him back. He determined to substitute diplomacy for force.

"Very well," he agreed, with simulated resignation. "You can have the managership of the new ladies' hat department. But if you don't make good," he warned, "out you go."

"Fair enough," said Arthur. "I'll make good."

Mr. Monfrent did not like the cheerful way in which his son grinned, but he decided to let the display of unwarranted confidence pass without a comment.

IV.

MR. MONFRENT paced the lawn before the clubhouse with increasing nervousness. He had had a bad morning, directly traceable to Arthur's non-appearance for breakfast.

"Mr. Arthur hasn't been home at all, sir," the butler answered his inquiry for his son. "He telephoned to say he would meet you at the club this afternoon, sir."

Devilish situation on the day of the Father and Son final. Matter of fact, the whole tournament had been a week of devilish situations, one crowning the other. Lucky Arthur and himself had been drawn in the lower half and Jerry Phillips with his boy, Joe, in the upper. Otherwise the Monfrents never would have survived to the finale. Why, he actually had had to carry Arthur along once; shoot away above himself to win on the eighteenth. The boy's golf had gone to pieces.

He was paying altogether too much attention to his new job. What in thunder could Arthur want with the managership of the ladies' hat department? The thing was a white elephant without a decent designer; and designers were not exactly languishing on every doorstep. He had even told his son as much, but the boy only laughed.

Wanted a man's-sized job, did he? Confident he could get a good designer, was he? What under the sun was the matter with the youth of the times?

So Mr. Monfrent reflected, moodily stirring tufts of grass with his boot-tips.

Jerry Phillips passed on his way to the locker room.

"If you have tears to shed, prepare," he warned, gloatingly. "Going to trim you again this afternoon—like Pinehurst and Garden City."

Mr. Monfrent roused himself to a retort. "You couldn't trim us if you got us in a barber's shop," he said, but his heart was not in the defiance.

He peered about anxiously, looking for Arthur. His son was not in sight. On the veranda he saw Mrs. Gerhard, but he stifled his first impulse to walk over to her, much as he would have appreciated her comforting company.

Hadn't the woman let him infer that she played a rotten game, and hadn't he seen her one morning lately practising driving? Shot after shot straight as the flight of light down the fairway—and good distance, too; remarkable distance for a woman. What did she mean by deceiving him?

He made a few more petulant kicks at the turf on the strength of this competition. Anxiety, or some kindred emotion, finally conquering him, he walked slowly to the veranda.

"Is the doughty warrior ready for the fray?" Mrs. Gerhard greeted as he approached.

"Most unready," he answered. "Have you by any chance seen Arthur about?"

"I left him at the car. He'll be here any minute," Mrs. Gerhard informed him.

Mr. Monfrent grunted, usually a preliminary to a particularly caustic remark. In this instance none was forthcoming. Arthur appeared, strolling slowly down the gravel towards the clubhouse, with a fetching girl on his arm. Even while he railed inwardly at this dereliction from duty, Mr. Monfrent recognised her attractiveness. His son halted beneath.

"Meet you in the locker room," he called and went on.

The girl started to climb the steps to the veranda, pausing to return Arthur's wave as he rounded the corner of the building.

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"Who is the young lady?" Mr. Monfrent inquired.

"Don't you know?" Mrs. Gerhard countered.

"How in thunder should I know?"

Mrs. Gerhard smiled quizzically, but she did not reply. The girl had breasted the steps and was approaching them.

"My niece," she said simply, by way of introduction.

Mr. Monfrent bowed and was conscious of a charming voice and an equally charming smile. It was not until he was half way to the locker room that he wondered what the niece's name was. Mrs. Gerhard had forgotten to mention it.

V.

GOING to the thirteenth, Mr. Monfrent and Arthur were four down. The match was a four-ball foursome. The gallery, hastening to the next tee, buzzed with comment about the younger man's game. He was badly off form.

"Tough for the old boy," commented one irreverent youth. "Shooting pretty close to par for the first time in his life, and Artie blows up on him."

For Mr. Monfrent the short walk through the woodland path to the uphill thirteenth was a walk in shadows deeper than those cast by the lacy roofing of leaves. His son paused to dip a drink from the softly bubbling spring just off the path.

"Pull yourself together, boy," Mr. Monfrent pleaded in a whisper, stooping beside him. "If there's anything wrong, forget about it."

Arthur dashed the water away.

"Nothing wrong, dad. The other way round," he said, taking advantage of the opening offered. "I wasn't going to tell you till the match was over, but—"

"What?"

"I was married last night. In Greenwich."

Mr. Monfrent's face twisted with a dozen conflicting emotions, before he said: "I can even stand that shock, if you'll just pull yourself together and let's trim that jeering old pirate and his jeering offspring."

Arthur was last off the tee. As his drive blazed a white arc far up the hillside to the edge of the plateau-like green, the gallery burst into a murmur of amazement. It was a shot worthy of Hagen at his best; a slashing, whizzing drive. He was on in two for an easy putt. The boy was back in form.

From that point on there seemed nothing to the match but the younger Monfrent, although his father, playing with stern steadiness, at least equaled Jerry Phillips's score, if he did not better it.

They were all square on the eighteenth, having halved the sixteenth.

It was Arthur's honor. For the short hole he chose to use his mashie. The ball sailed high in the air and settled, with what seemed to Mr. Monfrent an audible plunk, in a sand pit to the right. Joe Phillips, following, dropped his drive over the near edge of the green. It stopped rolling about ten feet from the flag. Not by any means an impossible putt.

Mr. Monfrent approached the task before him with grim determination. The mashie, for all his Southern practice, was still a bit of a bugbear. But he set his teeth and contrived a creditable effort. The white globe struck the sand trap to the left, rolled to its crest and then, after hesitating for what seemed an eternity, flopped onto the green. On the very edge, a good eighteen feet from the pin—but on!

Jerry Phillips's drive left him short. His mashie pitch got on nicely, however, not four feet off. He was good for a three, unless Providence intervened. Joe might go down in two. Matters looked dark for the Monfrents.

Arthur took the niblick his caddie proffered and weighed the shot carefully. Then, quickly, but without undue haste, he brought the clubhead through its short act. The ball rose from the trap on the crest of a wave of sand, thudded fully on the green and rolled placidly to the very edge of the cup, where it stopped. Jerry Phillips reached over and pushed it away, conceding the three.

"You're away," he said cheerfully to Mr. Monfrent.

The latter made a mental survey of the situation. Joe Phillips was sure of a three

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—and he might get a two. Jerry, also, was virtually certain of a three. His own ball was on the edge of the green. If he sank the putt Arthur and he might win. But an eighteen foot putt—no wonder that old pirate of a Phillips was cheerful.

The gallery had been augmented around the home green by a group of ladies, among whom Mr. Monfrent recognised Mrs. Gerhard and her niece. Arthur was walking over to them. His face was lit with an adoring smile as he joined the pair.

Why, of course, Mr. Monfrent told himself with a sudden shock at his own denseness; of course. The niece was the girl Arthur had married.

He felt a quick resentment, but he caught hold of himself and bent to the task before him. He was resolved to play safe. Better to make sure of halving the hole than to gamble on the prospect of sinking an eighteen-foot putt. Mustn't press, he told himself. Mustn't shoot too hard.

Confound Arthur, anyway. Why couldn't he have waited, instead of running off and getting married that way? Was he afraid his father would object? What in thunder —Mr. Monfrent dismissed this train of thought and concentrated on the putt. Mustn't put too much left into the shot. Play safe. Be sure of a three. Confound the boy, anyway.

The putter swung back, slowly as a pendulum, and came forward as irrevocably. The clubhead's impact against the ball sounded clearly.

"Too much," Mr. Monfrent groaned inwardly at the sharpness of the sound. "Confound the boy taking my mind off the shot."

The ball sped forward, seeming to gather speed as it went, straight towards the hole. Mr. Monfrent watched in heartsick awe. It would go well over to the other edge of the green, he calculated. He'd be lucky to get a four.

But it didn't! It struck the cup, rimmed its edge in whirling fury—and dropped in! A two!

Joe Phillips's putt missed by a full foot. The match was won. Jerry Phillips and his son were defeated at last.

Mr. Monfrent beamed genially as the gallery broke into cackling applause. This was his moment. He had worked five years for this. He looked proudly about and saw Arthur approaching him. He smiled as he took his son's hand.

"You're married, are you, boy?" he mused gently. "Well, I'm damn glad that's over."

He did not specify whether he meant the marriage or the match.

VI.

"So," commented Mr. Monfrent that evening, "so, you're the Aileen Marley who wrote me that pert letter when I offered you a job. And now you're Mrs. Arthur Monfrent, Jr., and you're going to work for him in the ladies' department. No wonder he wanted it. I've been neatly hoodwinked." He turned to Mrs. Gerhard and shook his fist genially at her. "And by your niece, as well as my son," he said. "I suspect you knew it all the time."

"Not all the time," amended the aunt.

"Hum!" grunted Mr. Monfrent. "Most of it then."

Mrs. Gerhard nodded amiably.

For all his seeming light-heartedness, Mr. Monfrent was a bit downcast. He wished Arthur happiness with all his power, but he could not help feeling that his marriage meant an end to the many glorious afternoons of golf they had enjoyed together. It was a drear prospect. Suddenly a thought came to him, a possible solution.

He addressed his daughter-in-law.

"Do you play golf, Aileen?" he asked.

"I did play rather well, but my game hasn't had much attention lately," Aileen admitted, pressing the hand of her husband, who was sitting beside her. "Auntie is a whale, though."

"I know it," said Mr. Monfrent grimly. He turned to Mrs Gerhard. "You'll have to marry me," he announced, solemnly. "Then we can have a foursome in the family."

"I suppose I must," sighed that fair lady. "I should hate to spoil such a promising foursome."

THE END

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The Silver King

By F. ST. MARS

HIS mother's huge tail swished the last layer of gravel over him with a: "There! That's all he'll get from me" sort of action, and, turning, she dropped slowly downstream with dozens of her sisters, big, spent fish, exhausted after the spawning.

All that day the great steel-blue salmon, distended with roe and milt, had fought and courted in the narrow, shallow water of the "reds," as the spawning grounds are called, whilst the sun marched slowly across the valley from crest to opposite crest of those eternal frowning mountains, who in their time must assuredly have witnessed this gay and animated scene thousands, aye, hundreds of thousands of times, and taken no notice. And by the time day dawned again all were gone. The river was left to itself; to its normal population.

Really, if you come to think of it, there was no special reason why his mother should trouble her head overmuch about him. Why should she? He was something about—exactly counting as to units does not matter in this case—the twenty-first thousandth egg she had laid at that spawning, and she had good right to her view that she had, for that year, at any rate, done her duty by the great and honored tribe to which she belonged.

She had slid downstream contented, she to rest in the females' pools; her enormous husband—who was the largest "kipper," as she was the biggest "baggit" on the spawning ground—to the males' pools, for the sexes do not associate—if, indeed, they tolerate each other—after the honeymoon.

Under three good feet of gravel, in the groove that his mother's strong tail had scooped out, he lay, a pink salmon egg among thousands of other pink salmon eggs—in the next groove, belonging to another fish, they were white, and others were red—all about a quarter of an inch in size. And even there he was not safe; even here that terrible, grim battle of life, that awful struggle for existence, which is the grim motto of the wild, began in earnest, and never ceased till the day of his death. A big

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bronze-spotted trout, showing something of the salmon in his shape but of heavier build, came nosing and rooting in the gravel with his horny jaws, as if the old rascal knew, or guessed, or smelled what was there. He could no more than dislodge a few of the topmost eggs, a score or so that had escaped deep burial, and these he ate. *Our* egg was not among them.

Again, a few days later, the hoofs of a herd of stampeded red deer kicked aside some of the gravel, and the stream, taking a few eggs, carried them off, to be instantly rushed at and swallowed by the trouts' smaller relations lower down. *Our* egg was not among those, either.

And the days passed, slow, silent, filled always with the song of the laughing waters, who knew of the secret of the million eggs hidden in their golden bed and kept it.

A very old male salmon, the last of the kippers to leave the reaches above the reds to which he had wandered, or been driven, rolled slowly by, then nearly stranded, beat his great tail, swung clear, and turned heavily to snatch up the eggs that his struggles had disclosed. *Our* egg was not among these, either. But it was an omen. Even his own tribe, it appeared, were ranged on the side of his enemies, and none more deadly than they, either.

Ninety-four days after the spawning a "spate," or "freshet," born of the winter snows up among the hills, came surging downstream, while the stream itself rose bank-high. The force of the water came round a curve above the reds, and hit and hollowed out the opposite bank, and then swung down on the reds with, fortunately, much reduced force. But even so, its eroding power was great.

It scooped like a hundred spades on the bed of the stream, digging great grooves in the sacred gravel, and the exposed salmon eggs went dancing and rolling downstream in thousands. Some found safe anchorage behind pebble or bowlder lower down, some stranded and went out, as a draft blows out a light of a little lamp barely lit, and some—fetched up in the crops of birds, and the mouths of rats, water shrews, and fishes.

Yet, once again, *our* egg was not among them, but yet once more, too, he might have been—it was all a question of fate, you see, or chance, if you like to give fate that incognito.

One hundred and seventy days after the spawning—long after even the last and most exhausted of the great fish had traveled down the hundred miles or so of river, and gone to sea, our egg hatched out.

As a son of the mightiest of all the great salmon on the reds, he was not altogether exciting. I suppose one expected something more, but Nature is no show artist; with her the end justifies the means—any means. He was little more than a line, a dark streak, and a none-too-active one at that, half seen, half guessed, and scarcely more than half an inch in length, lying hidden among the pebbles.

He carried his food with him, yolk of the eggs whence he was born, in a sack, not on his back exactly, but underneath, and it was to him at once drink and food, for he had no other, and lived on it entirely for the next six weeks, absorbing it slowly, as one who gathers strength for a great struggle. At this stage even he assumed a title of his own, and enjoyed the rank of "alevin."

And the first of the water birds moving up to the Arctic to nest—at least, he wasn't going to nest south of Shetland, anyway—a diving goosander, came mooching about among the gravel, and gobbled up a beak partly full of his brothers and sisters to right and left of him, but he, by the merciful falling back of a misplaced sheltering pebble, escaped.

That would be in about the end of April, or perhaps the beginning of May, when these last things happened, and the birds were beginning to dream of eggs, and the buds were more than hazing the woods.

Six weeks later, sackless and hungry, we find our young salmon dodging about among the golden pebbles, beneath which he vanished like an electric spark at the slightest hint of danger—at the vision of the great spotted trout, at the shadow of the trim, lanky heron, at the paddle and commotion of wandering wild duck.

He was now rather more than an inch in length, of a light brown, barred with dusky bars and spotted a little with orange

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and black, and the tail of him was forked—in short, he had attained to the style and title of a " parr," or " smolt," or " samlet," a young salmon who had never seen the sea, and his transverse dusky bars were his badge. When once he had been to sea those bands would vanish.

With greater strength and a new hunger came a greater desire for adventure. Our parr was no longer content to cower under stones, living on a sack of yolk. He would see the world.

All around him were hundreds of parr doing the same thing, but, unlike him, not at all succeeding, for even at that age he gave promise of greater things than the majority, and was a bit more virile than they, if that were possible.

The larva of some water insect, wriggling by on the current, caught his eye. He saw it across the ten-foot circle of light at the surface, and, shooting out like a drawn streak, caught it.

In an instant he was back again behind his particular pebble. It was his first " kill," cleanly done, too. A mature fish could have executed it no better.

Three times he dashed out and made his kill at passing larva with like results, but at the fourth attempt the finger of Fate descended upon him.

Without warning, a medium-sized trout—that had been lying under the bank, watching the hundreds of adventurous young parr making their first kills—rushed at him with open mouth. It was, however, just precisely that gleam of golden-bronze, as the trout reflected the upper light, that saved our parr.

That telltale gleam flashed to his quick eyes and—he was gone. The trout had done something in the way of getting from one place to another himself, but even at that stage our parr proved that the salmon is the king of swimmers, which none can beat.

He looked like a thin, dark line which had been precipitated from gravel to midstream, and the baffled trout, after following a few yards, turned back. There were plenty more parr where that one came from, anyhow. Our parr, however, was in difficulties instantly again. His rush had carried him out into midstream, where he had never ventured before. Here he got the full force of the current, and it was nothing to laugh at. It would have beaten a man. It *did* beat our parr.

Instinct told him that to attempt to swim against it for any time meant suffocation—any fish will tell you this axiom, by the way—and he could not tread water, so he went whirling downstream, not pleased at all, but glad enough if he could steer end on, and not go helplessly twirling broadside, like a dead caterpillar, to strand on the nearest bank, or foolishly break his back on a bowlder.

That journey was exactly two miles in length, and for a first journey not what one might call altogether dull. He missed the lunge of a red-throated diver's beak—they would have called her a loon in America—nearly left one blade of his forked tail in the mandibles of a canary-capped widgeon—which is a species of wild duck—went clean between the jaws of a crafty old pike, hoary with accumulated sin—what was he doing there, anyway, I wonder?—and executed a lightning glide and an electric quick " waggle " in and out among half a dozen respectable sized trout anchored behind bowlders, like ships head to stream, just waiting right there until the flood floated down.

Oh, no! That journey was no Sunday afternoon sleep, not by a hatful, and only about the slickest baby fish that ever flicked a tail-blade could have got through with it outside the folk he met.

The stream was broader here down below, slower and deeper, and there were grand old buttressed trees that grew along the banks, and held out mighty, shadowing arms over the water, as priests that deliver a blessing—they did, a blessing of shade.

But thicker and closer vegetation meant insects, and insects, some of them, are, from a baby fish's point of view, the very devil, and our parr had soon to learn that the world held other " die quicks " beside fish and birds.

Searching quietly under the bank for a " nifty " hiding place, whence to swoop out upon anything killable that passed, he was aware of a phenomenon. It looked some-

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think like a darkish spoon, without a handle, and was about the same size, perhaps, but it had legs, and they paddled—the hind ones were flattened like oars—and it had eyes that glared, and it had jaws working crosswise, not up and down, that might easily—no, by Jove, not by a riverful were they going to crack the backbone of a little parr this session.

There was a movement through the water, quick, intense, dangerous. It looked as if a black line had been ruled very quickly, and vanished. That was the phenomenon making its rush at the parr—the phenomenon whose official name was water-beetle.

But even at that age a salmon *is* a salmon, and no common bait for vulgar insects. Came a streak in front of the black line, a zigzag something, as if two electric wires had come in contact in that place.

It was not that, though. It was a reflection of light from above on the silvery side of our parr as he heeled over on one of those dizzy darts which, for sheer, amazing, swift agility, cannot, as far as I know, be beaten by any other fish that swims.

Fortunately, our parr was not alone. Out of the millions of eggs deposited on the reds higher up some had escaped Nemesis, and, like our parr, swam, or been floated, downstream, and could be seen lurking everywhere under the bank, or darting about in and out of the misty water shadows like dusky phantoms. Still our parr was the biggest, if only by a fraction, a trifle the strongest, a little quicker, a shade more virile.

He it was who was first in the streaking rush after the fat cockchafer grub that came floating down; he who beat his confrères by an eighth of an inch in the glorious hunt after an unfortunate young minnow; he, especially, among other fortunate ones, who, from agility and speed alone, did *not* happen to be there when the half duck, half diver shape of the red-breasted merganser came shooting upstream along the bottom, striking right and left with her serrated beak, from which there was no hope of slipping out, at the shooting, whizzing, hurtling and entirely surprised parr scattering every way at once; and he, I grieve to record, was the murderer who was first to discover the half dozen poor little alevins who, with yolk sacks still attached, had been helplessly swept down by the stream and stranded in a sheltering shallow.

In that hour he became a cannibal, and learned, as his monstrous father had known for many years now, that there are few more appetizing meals for a salmon than another salmon sufficiently smaller to be easily slain. Even so, if our parr had been alone, nothing probably could have saved him from his swarming foes; and it was only the fact that there were always others around him just a trifle less agile or swift or alert and wary, just a little less trouble to catch—though goodness knows none of them were easy prey—it was only this fact which saved him at all even at the start.

Birds in the air, as a rule—there are a few exceptions, perhaps, of which the heron may turn out to be one—eat more for their weight than mammals do, because of their tremendous energy. Fish in the water, in like manner, although their life is divided between strenuous action and periods of long quiescence, appear to eat more than mammals for their weight.

Nevertheless, there appeared to be something lacking in the stream and the river which nothing could make up. Worms, grubs, alevins, drowned or drowning insects, little fish, tadpoles, and even—oh, whisper it!—very young, weak, or wounded parr were not, it seemed, enough for our samlet.

He did not grow, or, at least, he grew absurdly little, and the same was the case with his fellows. Something was wanting—almost as if fresh water was not his home, after all, and he was but waiting in enforced idleness, and on enforced half starvation fare, against the time when he should be called to his natural sphere.

True, he took all he could get. Not much passed his way small enough for him to tackle it, and a good many were attacked who were not small enough.

Those who had hunted him at first began to give it up as a bad job and turn to other and less elusive and active parr. In some cases the tables were reversed, indeed, and those who hunted him at first became the hunted themselves.

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The case was that all through the long hot summer you might any day make out his dusky, barred body and the spots on his gently waving tail as he hung, head to stream, behind a gigantic bowlder at the tail of the pool. He commanded the backwash here, and anything helpless or exhausted by the rush of water without would as likely as not be washed round behind this bowlder.

If pursued by the trout, who lived farther down, but occasionally raided up as far as here, our parr vanished like a drawn whippy line into a maze of half submerged bowlders, where it was useless, if not unhealthy —one trout got wedged here between two bowlders, and the water beetles and others attended his funeral—to follow.

The mergansers and their cousins, the divers, did not, as a rule, come here, but fished the open pool; and the only foes he had really to worry much about were the stalking, wading heron, whose beak was death; the jeweled kingfisher, who pounced down, not telling whence he came; and the neat little, bad-tempered, pugnacious, white-bellied water-shrew, who when he slept lived in the bank, but occupied most of his time running up and down the bed of the stream eating things.

He was quite small, really—not more than six inches long—and very pretty; with his black jacket and white waistcoat; but his weak point was that he never seemed able to gauge his limits and was always getting into trouble with things larger than himself. Our parr was no larger, and you can imagine that a six-inch black and white devil with red, hooked teeth who could dive and swim, represented to him the personification of nightmare.

Besides these foes, there were also generally one or two other parr hung up on the watch in this backwash, but they were all smaller than our friend.

Yet, although they took jolly good care to give him room to "swing in the fairway," so to speak, I would not have staked much on their good conduct had they been able to catch our friend in difficulties, for that immutable law of the wild, the survival of the fittest, is even more strictly enforced under the water than in the air or on the land. Sister Mercy and Dame Nature never were on speaking terms, you know, and it is safe to predict, never will be.

Thus, then, our parr passed his first summer.

Autumn came, and the forests flamed to red, dulled over, and turned to somber, sullen abodes of silence; and winter chilled the air and later the water. Insects vanished, or only occasionally, in the shape of a winter gnat or belated moth, gave promise of a meal, and our samlet—growing only very slightly all the time—was forced to nose and delve, like any common barbel of the river, among the sand and mud for such grub as he could find.

Hunger came to the stream, and murder, red of jaw, stalked abroad openly by day and night. Samlet ate weaker samlet, and trout ate trout, and samlet, too, if they got the chance; and the birds, herons, cormorants, divers, widgeon, wild duck, waterhen, and a dozen others, ate all the lot when they could catch them.

Our fish stuck to his chosen hunting ground, however, by now the largest of a small squadron of lusty survivors, who did not eat each other because they were all too nearly matched to attempt the risk—a miniature concert of the powers.

Snow drew her shroud over the mountains, and the peaks at dawn and sunset became hues to dream about, but never for mortal men to paint. The stream took on a colder, harsher "feel." And then came the big salmon up run, and the reign of terror began.

Our parr, chasing a half-drowned winter rat across stream on the current, became aware of them first in the shape of two great gray-blue kelts—as the adult salmon are called—rounding a bend. They hurled themselves after him like unto torpedoes, and he made himself scarce in his bowlder refuge with only an inch to spare 'twixt their big hooked beaks and his little forked tail.

They passed on, presumably taking the rapids above in their leap, and next morning the stream was full of salmon—magnificent monsters from nine to forty pounds in weight—all heading up stream to spawn.

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Our parr waited out in the open water long enough to witness one battle royal between two twenty-pound " kippers "; tarried long enough to see, though he did not know it, what might or might not have been his father, like a battleship among cruisers, towering, enormous and terrifying, plowing his dread way through the crowded packs on the track of his scarcely smaller mother perhaps—a mighty and grand pair of parents such even as that famous stream had not often in all the æons seen before; dallied long enough, too, to know what it was to see five-pound trout hunted like a fox, and to know himself, a second later, how the trout felt when his tiny carcass caught the eye of a hungry, or angry, monster, and he executed, over, under, round, and it almost looked as if through, the jostling crowd of mighty silver kings just the nearest approach to mimicking an electric spark run amuck that ever he accomplished in his life.

Then he got to the bowlder lair and stayed there. Even his irrepressible, roving, insolent, cruel spirit was awed at last, I think. Other fish, even great eels and trout and pike, were permissible terrors, but the " grown-ups" of his own world!

Well, after all, even if he *was* frightened, it was no small thing to be able to boast that only a salmon can beat a salmon, and he was showing fear from the jaws of the aristocrat of the waters, and not from any " lesser breeds without the law," say what you will.

Our samlet, however, cared nothing for the pomp and majesty of the marriage procession of his tribe. His one hope was to get away from the big cannibals as quickly as might be, especially as, thin, wounded, exhausted, unsightly, and in all probability starving, for aught he knew, they came dropping down-stream again after a time.

It was like witnessing a finny retreat from Moscow, but our friend did not stay. He fled, and, in fleeing, ran smack into a second run of smaller salmon coming round a bend.

This meeting with his older tribes-folk was worse than the first, because the smaller fish were more agile, and gave him an even more lively time of it, and it was a very tired and worried-looking samlet who, toward evening, flopped helplessly over a small waterfall some miles below, and stayed among the crevices between the big bowlders in the pool below to recuperate. One would almost have thought that he had been spawning, too.

Spring passed, and summer came again. Our samlet stayed on, a little bigger, a trifle less dusky, a wee bit more ferocious for his size, and with, by the same token, a fraction better chance of surviving in the ever-hungry river.

There is no record, however, when he left this place—some time in the autumn, probably—but we next find him many miles down-stream, lurking, with some sign of cleverness, which must have been in the family, and one reason why his famous father had survived to grow to such gigantic size—lurking, I say, among the branches of a sunken tree, whose trunk was all but silted over.

Now, no better spot can be chosen by a fish than such a one as this. Through the mazes of the weed-hung branches he could precipitate his little body upon the numerous insects and small fish that came to it as a refuge, could chase them in and out at top speed; from here, too, he could dash forth like some glint of light upon his prey drifting downstream, or to this place he could retreat when hunted, and let his pursuers rush in among the snags and spikes, at the risk of scales and delicate fin-membrane, if they dared. Mostly did they not dare, but passed on sulking, as fish do.

Because the actions of the wild folk be meaningless to us we think them purposeless. This fish was not here by chance. There was—you could feel it once every twelve hours, at any rate—a certain smack in the water here different to what it had been up-stream, a hint, a mere suspicion of salt.

One might guess that the last lingering power of the invading sea at high tide just, and only just, reached here. It was so, and our parr or samlet had come here to acclimatize himself, to get, as it were, " salted " before taking that plunge which, among salmon, is the equivalent of what we would call making a man of him.

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At last there came a day when our fish, who had been growing more silvery and more restless every day, appeared unable to stand it longer. He swam out from his lair and headed downstream.

He was now about seven inches long and some two years old, and already a good many years older than that in knowledge of cunningly preserving his own skin at the expense of others.

It was a life-giving day. As he rose to the surface the sun glittered so on the water that one was forced to shut one's eyes. A low, black cloud, with the rain-curtain beneath, was chasing up one shore of the rapidly widening river, and the woods and copses were dressing themselves in a hazy yellow-green of new life.

As he rose, our fish made a ripple, and instantly there came all around him a dozen such ripples, and a dozen keen, small, wet, shining heads broke the surface of the water at once.

A white splash glided athwart the sun above, and, turning, hurled down in a series of diving plunges. Quick it was, that herring-gull, but our parr was quicker.

A flick of a little tail, a swish, a gleam, and he was gone, leaving the gull to settle and wonder, perhaps, how his cousins, the terns, manage to plunge under the water so far as the impetus of the fall took them.

Then our parr saw that he was not alone again. A dozen other little fish, from five to six inches long, were darting down with him all heading one way, all taking absolutely no notice of one another, but all keeping loosely together. Yes, it was young salmon, some of them, perhaps, were brothers and sisters of our friend—all heading downstream, all traveling steadily, as those who swim upon a journey and have many miles to 'cover.

On they went, this little party, through the depths, now growing hazy and brown, like fog, from the mud that the tide brought.

From time to time as they moved they caught a fleeting glimpse in the fog of other small silvery shapes—other parr heading the same way themselves; from time to time, too, a plunge and breaking-up of the circles of white-gold light above, which marked where the surface was, and the dizzy zigzagging shoot down of a terrified samlet, warning them that their course was being watched by keen eyes from the air above, and that toll of their ranks was being asked and taken.

But our fish had really no idea that he was one of an army acting under a single impulse to put the river behind their tails, and that the passage of that army was known, if not, and this is more than possible—expected.

The otter came upon them as an express train might come upon a bewildered switchman out of a fog. But she was worse than any express train, for she made no noise in the coming.

Indeed, there was no noise down here beneath the surface of the water at all, not so much as a whisper. Everything was deadly, grimly, maddeningly silent. That was what made it so terrible. No one said anything at all. Goodness knows what they felt and thought, or if they felt and thought even.

The otter was moving, kicking out with her powerful hind legs, a train of silver bubbles trailing behind like the tail of a comet. But these bubbles, be it noted, only looked silver from above; from all other aspects they were nearly invisible. She was hungry and wanted those smolts.

She certainly saw them one instant; next instant she beheld a phenomenon, as if a group of shooting stars had burst under her nose; and next instant after that she was alone, threshing through the hazy water, into which the little fish had absconded like magic.

The otter passed on, and the samlets more or less came together again, heading straight downstream for all the world as if nothing had happened. A cormorant—a wonderful bird decorated in silver sequins if seen from above only—now shot upward out of the gloom, and at home under the surface almost as the fish themselves. Our parr whizzed straight ahead, as though fired at that instant out of a gun; caught a fractional glimpse of the reptilian green eyes of the bird staring at him within an inch; may, or probably may not, have heard the snap of the cormorant's beak half an inch behind his tail; raced like a mad fish adown

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the stream as the great black bird turned with marvelous agility and gave chase; failed utterly, in his hurry, to notice the cormorant turn suddenly aside a hundred yards farther on, and vanish as though alarmed at something, and—

Our parr stopped so suddenly that it seemed almost as if his tail must have been driven through his head. It was an awful shock; but shocks, calculated to give most creatures concussion of the brain, do not worry fish.

The parr rebounded as off a spring, spun like a top, shot away like a fish demented in the opposite direction, stopped dead, and rebounded again, found himself surrounded by a dozen or so other parr all doing the same thing, and went apparently right "off the handle." For the next few minutes he vanished into a whirling, darting, tearing, dashing, lashing chaos of his fellows.

It was, you see, the samlet's first—and he no doubt thought it was going to be his last—experience of a net, and he didn't like it. Wild creatures are so utterly free that if they are checked from going precisely where they want to for half a minute they go clean demented. The unspeakable fear of the trap is born in them all.

What happened precisely directly after that the fish had no very clear idea. He had a confused notion of being hauled up enclosed in a thing like little matted weeds, and, in intolerable confusion, out into a still more intolerable suffocating glare; of being seized by a giant creature in a grip that nearly finished him; of being held as in the clutches of an octopus while something or something else was done to him by another giant; of a whirl through that pestilential, choking glare, of hitting the water with a smack, and of racing blindly, madly, feverishly down the estuary—free again by some miracle that he could not understand.

What had happened was that our fish, along with others of his kind, had been caught up by order of the Board of Conservancy for that particular river—that is to say, had been netted and marked with a little gold ring, and then set free again in the hope of finding out, if possible, whether he would return to his own home river eventually, and how much weight he would gain in the interval, and to what length he would grow, always supposing, of course, that he was ever caught again and the ring recovered.

That night our parr found himself in the open sea, and there he vanished utterly—went out, sauntered into the land of spooks, and was no more, swallowed up in the dim, great, mysterious ocean whose realms are even to this day largely a closed book.

Two and a half years later, on one of those beautiful evenings of rose and purple fragrant balm which July sometimes gives us, a big gull, heading homeward across the mouth of that very estuary down which our parr had passed on his way to sea, flung up suddenly and came round a long, lazy curve. His quick eyes—almost the quickest eyes in our wild—had seen the surface of the sea freckle over and boil white in one spot. No gull needs to be told the signs of a rising fish shoal, and this one was over the spot in quick time.

A pause followed, and then the jade-green wavelets seethed and foamed to whiteness in one patch, and a thousand mackerel, flashing, beautiful beyond description, in a living, leaping pool of mother-of-pearl, shot hissing along the surface.

Something, some terror of the deep, had driven them there. The gull must have known that, too; the wild, desperate try proved it to him. But he did not take any notice then. He shortened his wings and dived down in a series of darts. Here, indeed, was a meal of meals for any quick enough to take it, and next instant he wished he had not tried.

Suddenly, desperately with a scream of fear he flung out his long wings, madly he backed air, in pure terror he kicked with his webbed feet at the water as, without any kind of warning at all, open-jawed and terrifying, there shot up, cleaving the shoal asunder like blown leaves, the smooth, steel-blue, torpedo-shaped, rakish form of a lordly salmon.

It was too late for the gull to do anything. He barged fairly on to the back of the apparition before he could stop. Quick as thought the salmon bent on himself

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like a spring, there was a clash of teeth, a fountain of spray, and salmon, mackerel, and all were gone, and a considerably more than merely startled gull was rising from the sea with strenuous wing-beats that fairly whistled in the still air.

That grand fish was our one-time little parr, returning to his home river for the first time after years of roving adventures in the sea.

Dusk was settling down upon the river. The fisherman standing on an outcrop of rock glanced downstream to where the water and mud of the estuary lay like a sheet of bronze in the setting sun. He had been up since dawn. He yawned.

"Just one more cast," said he, "and then I'll go."

The gaudy artificial fly sailed across the pool lightly as a gnat, alighted gently, almost coaxingly, on the still, glassy water.

A swirl, a boil, a leap as if a bar of silver had been flung up, and the salmon—our salmon—was away with the bait.

Then he fought.

He shot, he streaked, he squeezed between all possible places, he sulked, he skipped, he darted, he dashed, he doubled, he danced nearly on end, he darted this way and that, he dived and nosed the bottom and the stones, trying vainly to rub off the intolerable thing that pulled and held him by the lip, he twisted and turned, he twirled, he threshed the surface into foam, he leapt fully six feet, he lay still, and he lashed with his tail at the line, he came near pretending to be done, only to spring against the butt, he circled hugely, he cavorted madly, he charged downstream like an escaped torpedo, he churned the shallows to whipped soda and milk, and at last, fighting still like seven devils, after thirty-nine minutes' furious battle, he was, inch by hard-fought inch, drawn in and, in the arms of a gillie, respectfully landed.

Then, after one long stare, the fisherman whistled. And quoth he:

"A marked salmon, by Jove! See the gold ring. He must go back. Measure him quick, and weigh."

He was going to put our salmon back, that man. He said so. He was going to put him back for the honor of the fish he had caught that day, especially for the honor of one, a monster of fifty pounds' weight and unknown years, who was, though neither man nor fish knew it, the father of our salmon. So his father died to save him, but I expect he would rather have lived.

Nine and three-quarter pounds was the weight of our salmon, thirty-one and a quarter inches was his length, and thirteen and a half inches was his girth, and the age, as we know, was precisely four and a half years. Therefore, as you will agree, he had not wasted time nor grown slowly while in the sea, whatever he had done in the river before.

Then, with a heave and a splash, they flung him back to the water, his home, and he turned his head for the second time to the salt ocean, and went, passing on his way dozens of salmon heading up the estuary to the river to breed. He himself, however, did not return to breed till he was five and a half years old, whatever he may have meant to do before he was hooked.

That was long ago, and our salmon was never caught again. But to this day, if you watch, if you wait by the spawning ground, if you have the patience and Heaven rewards you with luck, you will surely sooner or later catch a glimpse, just a glimpse, of the mammoth Silver King, the salmon, the pride and glory of that river, who, men say, would drag the heart out of the scale at sixty pounds, and you will remember him as a friend of yours whom you have known up from babyhood—our own salmon, something of whose life I have tried to tell you.

THE END

CHARLES ALDEN SELTZER

is now completing another of his graphic stories of the West, which will begin its course in this magazine within the next few weeks. It is highly dramatic, and presents a hero of altogether unique conception.

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The Harp of Yosuf Abram

By JACK OPPENHEIMER

FOR a long time Im Khadra had been awaiting the angel of death to lead him to the paradise of Allah and the joys of the blessed gardens. Each morning he arose and ate his scanty allowance of food. Each day he labored faithfully under the lax eyes of his guard, and each night he lay down to rest weary in body and lonely in soul.

Oft in a lazy hour, he recalled thoughts of the days of his liberty. He had been a beggar, yea, a winebibber and a thorough good-for-naught. Then he would smile to himself and marvel at the wisdom of Allah, who kept him a prisoner at hard labor, so that he might expiate his sins and enter through the blessed gates when death should cure him of life.

Then the great fear would come upon him that his imprisonment might not be enough to cleanse him of his grievous sins, and he would gather his fellow prisoners about him and tell them some tale. In this way he sought both to cheer a little the companions of his misfortune and to add a little to his commendations in the great book of the blessed recording angel.

So it happened one evening when the sun's last gleams were sprinkling the drab, gray sand of the prison yard with gold that Im Khadra gathered his companions about him and told them this tale of a certain youth.

"Yosuf Abram was a youth in his seventeenth spring, which is the most glorious spring in all the seasons of a man's life. He was tall and strong, with great shoulders, and a great head, crowned with raven black curly hair. At a tender age, his uncle, one Asra Muhda, had begun to in-

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struct him in playing the harp. So faithfully and assiduously had Yosuf Abram studied that now he could play with such skill that the harp strings seemed to be parts of his fingers and the music part of his soul.

"His artistry had long since surpassed that of his venerable uncle and teacher, but Yosuf was careful never to do his best in the old man's presence, so his benefactor might feel no shame for his age, or envy for the youth and fire of his pupil. Indeed, so great was Yosuf's consideration for the old man that he often struck a false note to enable his uncle to scold and correct him, for he knew scolding and rectifying youth to be the greatest pleasure of the aged, and he wished the declining years of his uncle's life to lack no happiness that he could cause.

"Like most musicians, Yosuf Abram was forced to earn his bread by playing and begging, but he wandered not from place to place exchanging moments of ecstasy for a crust of bread. Rather, he took up his stand boldly in the crowded bazaar, playing now before the booth of one merchant and now before the booth of another.

"Wherever Yosuf played there men gathered to listen with bated breath to the language of souls and acquire a little knowledge of the wonders of the gardens of paradise, where ten thousand angels play on ten thousand harps in a harmony so great that mortal ears would burst with the hearing of it.

"Wherever Yosuf played there trade was best, for he attracted many men, and these bought of the nearest wares when the music ceased. Indeed, they were glad of the proximity of that which they needed, for many of them used the time in listening to Yosuf's playing that should have been spent in making purchases.

"The merchants were not long in realizing that prosperity followed in the trail of the young beggar, and Yosuf soon found himself the recipient of many gifts from them, while anything he desired to purchase was quickly tendered him with the respects of the owner and a polite request to play some of his beautiful music in the shade of that booth on the following day.

"One merchant went as far as to offer Yosuf a definite stipend if he would play each day in the shade of his booth alone, but the young beggar was shrewd enough to know that to be dependent upon one man and to antagonize the other merchants would be a folly that even Allah could not forgive. He expressed his polite regrets and explained that music was a God-given gift and could not be confined to one spot or to one man, but was for the enjoyment of every one. Therefore, lest he anger the protector of all, he must continue to spread far and wide the beauties of his playing and thereby give thanks for the great gift of skill that Allah, blessed be his name, had granted him.

"Thus it came about that the fame of Yosuf Abram spread throughout the city. Men spoke of him when going to the mosque before prayer, or when idling in the drowsy hours of mid afternoon. And because all that men know is also soon known to women, Yosuf's name was often upon fairer lips than he suspected. In fact, he became the byword of the city, and his fame penetrated even unto the thrice guarded stronghold of the great and powerful Khan Adir Kuri.

"It was Arimida, beautiful lady in waiting to the Princess Roxanna, who told that stern and glorious daughter of the great Khan about the wonderful playing of the young harpist. Arimida knew about him from a serving maid named Tabitha, who had it directly from a bedridden uncle, who had it from his son, who was a merchant in the bazaar. In this circuitous manner did news from the city outside enter into the thrice guarded domain of the great Khan Adir Kuri.

"Great was the curiosity of the princess when she heard of the gifted Yosuf Abram. She expressed her wonderment that an ignorant beggar of common blood could play such music. She deplored the fact that custom, pride and station forbade her going out into the bazaar and listening to the beggar play upon his harp. Then she gazed out of the window and remarked, for the twelfth time that morning, that surely her garden was the most beautiful in the world. That it had the most beautiful and smallest

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lake, wherein swam the most beautiful and proudest of swans.

"Arimida agreed with the opinion of her mistress about the garden, but she gazed out of the window a longer time than the princess. Perhaps the fleecy clouds suggested it, or the soft blooms in the garden, or the velvety surface of the little lake, but she bethought herself that the princess had some time before expressed the intention of making a splendid robe for her father, the great Khan, so that all the world might see the handiwork of Roxanna, the dutiful daughter.

"Therefore she addressed his mistress, saying: 'Most benign princess, was it not thy intention to make for thine illustrious father a gorgeous robe?'

"'Even so,' answered the princess. 'But why speak of it now, soul of laziness?'

"'Because,' replied Arimida, 'if thou wilt give me wherewithal, I shall aid thee in the work. Let us go into the garden and sew on the robe, and I will help thee with it so that thou canst catch butterflies and amuse thyself while I sew.'

"'Scatterbrain,' scolded Roxanna. 'I have neither the silks nor the fine woolens necessary for the robe, so how can I give them to thee? Have patience and I shall send a slave with money to purchase them.'

"'How? Shall a common slave purchase the silks that the majestic Princess Roxanna will, with her own hands, transform into a robe, which her father, the great Khan Adir Kuri, will wear? Nay. None but the cleverest, most loyal and most beautiful of ladies in waiting, the Lady Arimida herself, will go to the bazaar to choose the goods for the robe.'

"'Nay,' said the princess. 'I shall go myself. Not even the Lady Arimida is worthy of purchasing the silks and fine woolens for the robe of my illustrious father.'

"'And may the unseemly chambermaid Arimida accompany the princess?'

"'Indeed, yes. Though she be unseemly, yet Arimida knows good silks. She may come to the bazaar.'

"Therefore everything was made in readiness. The great elephant of the princess was harnessed and her guard of thirty trusted sword bearers were called out to attend her. Presently she and the Lady Arimida were swaying on the back of the royal elephant, high over the heads of the common men who crowded the ways of the city, while all around them the thirty trustiest kept sharp lookout lest some harm befall the apple of the great Khan's eye and they lose their lives in consequence.

"Finally, the cortège arrived in the heart of the bazaar and in front of the booth of the princess's favorite merchant.

"This fortunate man, one Pira Bahkru, had, upon perceiving the approach of the royal elephant, made everything in readiness for the reception of his illustrious client. He cleared his shop of other customers, put softer cushions upon his two divans and displayed his costliest silks as skillfully as time and situation permitted. When the princess had dismounted he met her at the door and ushered her to the most comfortable of the divans.

"Reclining at her ease, the princess requested that Arimida make known their wishes to the merchant so that he might display his wares accordingly.

"Said Arimida: 'The great princess hath come to purchase silks and fine woolens for a robe which she contemplates making for her illustrious father. Show us therefore only goods worthy of being worn upon the person of the greatest man in the land. And, merchant, see that we are not interrupted by any beggar musicians. It has been brought to our ears that one Yosuf Abram disturbs the bazaar with his harpings. The princess will not have her ears offended by the vile music of the fellow. Indeed, she was loath to come for fear the tasteless beggar might intrude.'

"Pira Bahkru bowed low. 'Have no fear. Without stands the guard of the princess. Thirty men, brave and strong. The beggar will not come within many yards of my shop. But, pray, excuse me for a moment.' Again Pira Bahkru bowed and, bowing, smiled upon them.

"Then he turned his back to the ladies and smiled to himself. He strode to the rear of the shop where his assistant stood humbly awaiting the commands of his master. 'Fetch me Yosuf Abram,' he whis-

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pered. 'Bid him take his harp and hasten hither,' and he thrust two gold pieces into the hand of his assistant.

"'I hear and obey.' The assistant glided hastily from the booth.

"He was a wise, wise man, the merchant Pira Bahkru.

"The assistant hurried forth and soon met Yosuf Abram, who was about to take up his daily station in the shade of a nearby booth. 'Yosuf Abram,' said the messenger, 'my master Pira Bahkru hath use for thee. Come therefore with me to the shop.'

"'Nay,' said Yosuf. 'Since when doth Pira Bahkru command me?'

"'Beggar, fear not. My master rewards all men justly. Here is a piece of silver he hath sent thee.'

"'For that I will not stir a step. I shall make many pieces of silver playing my harp at this place.'

"'I did but jest with thee,' protested the messenger 'Here is a gold piece for thee.'

"'Now,' said Yosuf Abram, 'this beseems better the well known generosity of thy master. Where is the other gold piece he bade thee give me?'

"'Thy wisdom is as great as thy music. How well thou understandest my master to know that he sent thee two pieces of gold. Here is thy due, and hold not against me my little jests.'

"'Nay,' answered Yosuf. 'Tis the servant, not the master, whom I understand. Here is a piece of silver for thy trouble. Even a beggar must pay where payment is due. Come, I will accompany thee.'

"So they returned to the shop of Pira Bahkru and the servant bade Yosuf to wait outside the shop until he should see if his master was ready to receive the musician. There Yosuf waited and gazed at the elephant and the guard of the princess with the greatest awe.

"The servant acquainted his master that Yosuf was without, and Pira Bahkru instructed him to tell Yosuf to wait until the princess should have departed.

"The servant did as he was commanded, and upon hearing this request Yosuf was somewhat nonplused. He decided to make the best of things, however, for having accepted two pieces of gold from Pira Bahkru he was pledged not to depart. Therefore he looked about for a shady spot in which to ply his trade, but found none, excepting a spot directly under the elephant on which the great beast cast its shadow.

"'Brother,' he said, addressing one of the sword bearers. 'Is the beast vicious?'

"'As vicious as a lambkin or a pet dog,' answered the guard. 'He hath not ill will enough to eat his food without urging.'

"'Allah, grant thou speakest true,' said Yosuf and squatted down between the forefeet of the pachyderm.

"With intimate fingers he tuned the strings of his harp and soon there floated upon the stale air of the bazaar the songs of many birds welcoming the morning sun. The notes leaped and tumbled in the air. They somersaulted like madcaps on the ear, and all men within hearing stopped at their tasks and smiled.

"'Yosuf Abram playeth his harp,' said each man to his neighbor, and many hurried to the spot to enjoy the merry melodies the better by their propinquity.

"Inside the booth of Pira Bahkru the princess and her handmaiden had removed their veils and were busily viewing the beautiful silks that Pira displayed when the music of Yosuf's harp floated to their ears. Arimida dropped a piece of shimmering wispiness and stood as one entranced. The Princess Roxanna held her head to one side and closed her eyes as if in distaste.

"'Arimida,' said the princess, 'what melody is this?'

"Arimida said: 'Your graciousness, I shall inquire. Merchant, what melody is this?'

"'Tis the melody of a harp,' answered Pira Bahkru.

"'Who playeth the harp?' queried the princess.

"'One Yosuf Abram,' answered Pira.

"'Have him brought before me,' commanded the princess. 'Shall the player of such divine music be hidden from my sight?'

"'I am thy slave, Yosuf shall play before thee.'

"He was a wise, wise man, the merchant

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Pira Bahkru. He went to the door and called to Yosuf.

"Surprised at the summons Yosuf stilled his harp and came to Pira. 'What wilt of me, master?'

"'Only that thou play a bit in my shop.'

"'I play better under the blue sky.'

"'The princess commands.'

"'I am as a slave.' Yosuf entered the shop with bowed head and trembling limbs. The princess commanded! The far-famed, beautiful Princess Roxanna! The young beggar's heart beat tumultuously.

"'Your worship,' Pira Bahkru was saying, 'this is the beggar Yosuf Abram who playeth the harp. Raise not thy head till her highness hath donned her veil.'

"'Nay,' said the princess. 'For a miserable beggar the daughter of Adir Kuri doth not veil herself. That is a token of respect rendered to venerable men.'

"'Aye,' agreed Arimida. 'Who would veil for a beggar?'

"Yosuf kept his eyes to the ground and his head bent humbly. The beautiful Princess Roxanna! If he but dared to steal a glance.

"'Play!' said Arimida musically. 'Play for the great princess.'

"With his head still bent Yosuf essayed to make his fingers pick a beautiful melody. But his fingers shook and the tune that came from the harp was like the cry of a trembling fawn when the dogs surprise her in a thicket. Thin, full of fear, and wailing unpleasantly upon the ear.

"'Fei,' said Roxanna. 'Thou art afraid. Lift thy head and gaze upon me. I mean thee well.'

"With a lump in his throat Yosuf slowly lifted his head. He gazed steadily upon the stern countenance of the beautiful princess for a few moments. Steady and true was his glance. His eyes never wavered and be blushed not. And the Princess Roxanna gave him stare for stare.

"Then his gaze shifted to the face of the beautiful Arimida, and the head of the handmaiden drooped, while a red flood of flushes enveloped her. Yosuf's eyes, too, wavered and sought the floor, while his swarthy skin grew even darker. Suddenly his hands found the strings of his harp, and there pealed forth a pæan of joy. It seemed as though the sun had suddenly burst forth after many days of darkness and all creation sang to welcome it.

"His audience was spellbound. Without the tent men and guards were clustered silently. Never had Yosuf Abram played like this. All his past achievements were as ashes before gold. And never did the gaze of the Princess Roxanna waver from his countenance.

"It was a long time before Yosuf was permitted to cease his playing. It seemed as though the ladies could not get their fill of the wondrous music, Arimida with her eyes on the floor, and the princess with her eyes on the player. But the eyes of Yosuf Abram were at the feet of the beautiful handmaiden Arimida. Fixed, immovable, expressionless.

"At length the royal party departed, but first the princess presented Yosuf with a purse of gold pieces, the contents of which so amazed the gifted youth that all power of speech was stricken from him. He could but stare, and stare, and stare.

"It was Pira Bahkru who broke the silence. 'Blessed of Allah, what sayest thou now?'

"'A prayer, but silently.'

"'Indeed! Thou hast need of prayer. Is not the princess beautiful?'

"'Beautiful as the day.'

"'And the handmaiden, Arimida?'

"'Who can describe her beauty?'

"'And which pleaseth thee best?'

"'Shall the handmaiden be compared to the princess? Surely the beauty of the princess is greater, sterner and more appalling. Surely none can compare her with the handmaiden, if he be not like the rash man who held that the princess was not beautiful at all, but he was decapitated for his lies. Indeed, they are both most beautiful, but the humbler beauty pleaseth the humbler eye.'

"'Thou art shrewd,' said Pira Bahkru. 'But not wise. Thou thinkest thou hast great skill at playing the harp.'

"'Fair skill, master.'

"'Nay, but thy harp is a magic harp.'

"'How? My uncle hath never told me this.'

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"'He keepeth it a secret, so be discreet and mention it not to him. 'Tis a magic harp. A jealous harp. Take care thou dost not fall in love with the princess or her handmaiden lest thy harp die of jealousy or evil befall thee.'

"'Nay,' said Yosuf. 'Thou speakest childishly.'

"'It is so,' answered Pira. 'Mayst thou not prove the truth of it.'

"He was a wise, wise man, the merchant Pira Bahkru.

"Some days later a messenger appeared at the home of Yosuf Abram and bade him appear before the great Khan Adir Kuri and play for his entertainent.

"And so it came about that one evening Yosuf Abram sat at the feet of the great Khan, who sat on a dais beside his daughter, while the handmaiden Arimida attended her mistress. All around him in the great hall were clustered all the nobles and prominent men in the land, all eager to hear the playing of the beggar, Yosuf Abram.

"And Yosuf played. He played a love song to his adored Arimida, which was so fervent, so full of adoration that all who heard him held their breaths and tears came to their eyes.

"The handmaiden Arimida sat with her eyes on her lover and listened and understood.

"The eyes of Yosuf Abram were fixed at the feet of Arimida. His soul was on the tips of his fingers and spoke from the strings of the harp.

"The great hall was quiet as with the quietness of death, and the harp sang like an angel choir of a new life.

"The Princess Roxanna sat with her eyes on the player and listened and understood. Suddenly she leaned toward Arimida and spoke a few words.

"They were clever words, ludicrous words, and with no thought of her act Arimida giggled.

"A single little giggle, but it burst upon the crowded hall like the crack of a whip, and Yosuf heard it appalled. She had not known, she had not known.

"The harp gave a great jealous cry as it crashed to death, and its master fled out of the door.

"He was a wise, wise man, the merchant Pira Bahkru," concluded Im Khadra as he wrapped his prayer rug about him. "My old friend, more worn, more torn, more ragged than ever. How like its master," and Im Khadra entered the prison and retired to his cot.

THE END

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THE CALL

STEP out of yesterday,
Youth of my dreams,
For one golden hour.
The moments between
Are but dross
That we toss
To the winds.

Facets of light on this
Scintillant hour
Are burnished by time.
Come out of the tower
Of gloom
And dark doom
Into the light of to-day.

Ruby Douglas.
10 A

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